



# MONASH University

**Examining the relationship between employee perceptions of human resource  
management and employee well-being in the Chinese context**

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## Abstract

There is burgeoning interest in employee-oriented human resource management (HRM), with research suggesting that it is the *employee perceptions* of HRM (rather than the contents of HRM) that are closely associated with employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Despite fruitful advances in existing studies, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of three distinct but inter-connected perceived HRM dimensions (*perceived HRM content*, *HRM system strength*, and *HRM attributions*) and their differential impacts on employee well-being. This thesis integrates diverse dimensions of perceived HRM into a general framework to theorise the perceived HRM–well-being relationship in the Chinese context. This thesis comprises three studies — one systematic review study and two empirical studies.

Study One is a review study, which lays the intellectual foundation for Study Two and Study Three. Study One demonstrates that extant perceived HRM research has moved in three differential but inter-related directions: perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions. In order to contextualise employee perceptions of HRM, future research should identify a series of cross-level contextual settings within which HRM perceptions are framed. These include, for instance, cultural settings, economic and political systems at the macro level; company strategies, organisational features, and employment modes at the meso level; and cognitive schemes, demographic factors, and personal values at the micro level.

Study Two adopts a Conservation of Resources (COR) model and social exchange theory as overarching theories to examine the antecedent and employee well-being outcomes of employees' perceptions of statutory benefits schemes (a specific form of perceived HRM content). Study Two indicates that Chinese traditionality, as an individual-level cultural trait, is an antecedent of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. There is a negative relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, perceived benefits schemes impact on emotional exhaustion by influencing employees' job involvement.

Study three extends extant literature by establishing an integrative framework connecting different forms of HRM attributions (internal HRM well-being attributions and exploiting attributions, and external Labour Law attributions) and HRM system consistency to employee well-being. Drawing on the job demands–resources (JDR) model, Study Three demonstrates that thriving at work mediated the relationship between internal HRM exploiting attributions, external Labour Law attributions and employee well-being. On the other hand, internal HRM well-being attributions did not indirectly influence employee well-being through thriving at work. Furthermore, HRM system consistency moderates the association between internal HRM attributions (rather than external Labour Law attributions) and thriving at work.

Overall, my thesis unveils the relationships between divergent dimensions of perceived HRM and employee well-being in the Chinese context. I contribute to extant research by identifying the contextual factor (Chinese traditionality), and by incorporating novel mediators (job involvement and thriving at work) and a moderator (HRM system consistency) in exploring employee well-being. The results of my research suggest that managers should not only implement employee-friendly HR practices to promote employee well-being, but also clearly communicate the well-being-oriented intentions of HR practices to employees and motivate employees to develop positive job-related mindsets.

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### **List of Acronyms**

AVE	Average variance extracted
CFA	Confirmatory factor analysis
CFI	Comparative fit index
CI	Confidence level
CMB	Common method bias
COR	Conservation of resources
CR	Composite reliability
HPWS	High-performance work system
HR	Human resource
HRM	Human resource management
IFI	Incremental fit index
JDR	Job demands-resources
LLCI	Lower limit confidence level
POE	Private-owned enterprise
RMSEA	Root mean square error of approximation
SEM	Structural equation modelling
SOE	State-owned enterprise
TLI	Tucker-Lewis index
ULCI	Upper limit confidence level

## Thesis including published works declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

This thesis includes one original paper published in peer reviewed journals. The core theme of the thesis is HRM perceptions. The ideas, development and writing up of all the papers in the thesis were the principal responsibility of myself, the student, working within the Department of Management under the supervision of Professor Fang Lee Cooke, Professor Greg Bamber, and Professor Felix Mavondo.

(The inclusion of co-authors reflects the fact that the work came from active collaboration between researchers and acknowledges input into team-based research.)

In the case of (*Chapter Two*) my contribution to the work involved the following:

Thesis Chapter	Publication Title	Status (published, in press, accepted or returned for revision, submitted)	Nature and % of student contribution	Co-author name(s) Nature and % of Co-author's contribution*	Co-author(s), Monash student Y/N*
Chapter Two	Contextualising employees' perceptions of human resource management: A review of China-based literature and future directions.	Published	85%	1) Fang Lee Cooke, input into manuscript 15%	No

I have renumbered sections of submitted or published papers in order to generate a consistent presentation within the thesis.

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**Student signature:**

**Date:** 30/03/2021

I hereby certify that the above declaration correctly reflects the nature and extent of the student's and co-authors' contributions to this work. In instances where I am not the responsible author, I have consulted with the responsible author to agree on the respective contributions of the authors.

**Main Supervisor name:** Fang Lee Cooke

**Main Supervisor signature:**

**Date:** 30/03/2021

## Publications during enrolment

1. **Xiao, Q., & Cooke, F. L. (2020).** Towards a hybrid model? A systematic review of human resource management research on Chinese state-owned enterprises (1993–2017). *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 31, 47–89. (Not included as part of the thesis, see footnote for explanation<sup>1</sup>).
2. **Xiao, Q., & Cooke, F. L. (2020).** Contextualising employees' perceptions of human resource management: A review of China-based literature and future directions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*. (Study One of this thesis). doi: 10.1111/1744-7941.12259

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<sup>1</sup> My data were primarily collected from Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Therefore, I completed a review paper on HRM of SOEs in China in order to take stock of what is going on in SOEs. This review paper has been published at *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* (IJHRM).

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Rationale and structure of the thesis

The terminology of employees' perception of human resource management (HRM) has received considerable attention in recent years (Beijer, Peccei, Veldhoven, & Paauwe, 2019). The basic assumption underlying the research on perceived HRM is that it is the *employee perceptions* of human resource practices (rather than the contents of HRM) that are closely associated with employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, which, collectively, can lead to desired organisational outcomes (e.g., Jiang, Hu, Liu, & Lepak, 2017; Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009).

Despite fruitful advances in extant research, there is still not a comprehensive understanding of the conceptualisation and measurement of HR perceptions (Beijer et al., 2019). The concept of HR perceptions is not considered to be monolithic (Wang, Kim, Rafferty, & Sanders, 2020). Thus far, HR perceptions studies have moved in three directions: perceived HRM content (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and HRM attributions (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008).

First, research on perceived HRM content is primarily based on signaling theory (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013), psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 2001), and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Wang et al., 2020). These studies are concerned with the extent to which employees, rather than managers, agree or disagree that individual HR practices or HR bundles are available within organisations (Jiang et al., 2017). Some research also examined the extent to which employees are satisfied with the content of HR bundles or individual HR practices (Guan & Frenkel, 2019). A single HR practice may encompass retention-oriented compensation (Lam, Chen, & Takeuchi, 2009), training (Guan & Frenkel, 2019), and reward for creativity (Li, Deng, Leung, & Zhao, 2017), whereas HR bundles include multiple incarnations, such as high-performance work systems (HPWS) (Ali, Lei, Freeman, & Khan, 2019), control and commitment HRM (Ma, Gabriela Silva, Callan, & Trigo, 2016), and socially responsible HRM (Shen & Zhu, 2011).

Second, research on HRM system strength draws from Kelley's (1973) covariation model within attribution theory, focusing on employees' perceptions of meta-features of HRM systems (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Specifically, distinctiveness (visibility, understandability, legitimacy of authority, and relevance), consistency (instrumentality, validity, and consistent HRM messages), and consensus (agreement among principal HRM decision makers, and fairness) foster HRM systems to create a strong organisational climate in which HR practices deliver unambiguous messages to employees; thereby, employees' shared perceptions, rather than idiosyncratic perceptions of climate, emerge (Sanders, Shipton, & Gomes, 2014).

Third, based on attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985), extant HRM attributions studies focus mainly on a five-factor structure of HRM attributions; four of them are internal attributions (e.g., enhancing quality, keeping costs down, improving employee wellbeing, and exploiting employees) and one of them is external (complying with the union requirements). Internal attribution refers to the interpretation that HR practices are implemented as a function of managers' *voluntary* intentions and motivations. By contrast, external attribution is connected with the perception that managers are *passive* recipients, and that HR practices are adopted due to external and environmental constraints, which are beyond managers' control (Nishii et al., 2008). At the heart of the HRM attribution framework is the argument that employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes depend on the attributions they make about managers' motivations for putting the actual HR practices into effect (Hewett, Shantz, Mundy, & Alfes, 2018).

However, the three divergent types of perceived HRM (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions) have been examined in silos and have not been integrated into a general framework. Moreover, less is known about *how* complexity manifests in the antecedents of HR perceptions. This is an important research gap, because only when we know precisely about the antecedents of HR perceptions can we develop a more fine-grained understanding of the attributional processes through which employees make sense of HR practices and the effects of perceived HRM on employees within organisations. Furthermore, the majority

of existing research is concerned with individual and organisational performance at the expense of attention to employee well-being. From a practical perspective, the neglect of well-being is problematic, due to increased work intensification at the workplace (Shantz, Arevshatian, Alfes, & Bailey, 2016). In addition, from a theoretical perspective, less attention to employee well-being is flawed, at least in part, because examining employee well-being may advance our understanding of how the mutual gain framework explains the mediating mechanism of the HRM-performance relationship (Guest, 2017).

In order to fill the gaps discussed above, this thesis seeks to explain the relationship between employee perceptions of human resource management (HRM) and employee well-being in the Chinese context. Focusing on the different layers of the Chinese context (e.g., cultural values, the legal system, and the economic environment) can deepen our understanding of the contextual antecedents to perceived HRM. This thesis comprises three studies — one systematic review study and two empirical studies. Data were collected in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private-owned enterprises (POEs) in China. The thesis is set out in five chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction chapter, summarising the structure of the three studies (research motivation, research design and methodology, and contributions) and illuminating the overall contribution of the thesis. Chapters 2-4 are Study One, Study Two and Study Three respectively. Chapter 5, the Conclusions chapter, elaborates research findings, knowledge contributions, practical implications, limitations, and proposes several future research avenues.

## **1.2 Study One (Chapter 2)**

### **1.2.1 Research motivation**

As discussed above, the concept of HR perceptions is not monolithic (Wang et al., 2020). Thus far, HR perceptions studies have moved in three directions: perceived HRM content (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and HRM attributions (Nishii et al., 2008). While several reviews (Beijer et al., 2019; Hewett et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020)

have shed light on the developments in this field of research, they were general reviews that did not highlight advances in a specific country context. Given the increasing call for considering context in HRM research (e.g., Cooke, 2018; Kaufman, 2015) and that research on HRM in China has developed rapidly in recent years, it will be beneficial to conduct a systematic review to take stock of what we know and the limitations of extant research, in order to facilitate future research in this area. Such a review may also have relevance to other country contexts.

Study One (Chapter 2), guided by the following questions, sets the intellectual foundation for Study Two and Study Three. Answering the following questions can inform the necessity of conducting Study Two (Chapter 3) and Study Three (Chapter 4).

1. How are HR perceptions conceptualised and operationalised in extant research in the Chinese context?
2. To what extent do the three dimensions of HR perceptions (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions) differ from or connect with each other?
3. What contextual factors that influence HR perceptions have been examined?
4. What opportunities exist for future research to advance the field?

### **1.2.2 Research methods**

Chapter 2 is a review study. I followed three steps to collect and analyse articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals in English (excluding book chapters and conference proceedings). First, I searched the university library databases, including Wiley, Emerald, EBSCO, ProQuest, JSTOR, SAGE and Springer, using the keyword search terms in title or abstract: “HR perception”, “perceived HR(M)”, “employee perception of HR(M)”, “experience of HR(M)”, “report of HR(M)”, “HR(M) system strength”, “strength of HR(M) system”, “HR(M) attribution”, “HR(M) process.”

Second, I carefully screened all the articles generated from the first step and only included articles clearly discussing employee perceptions of HR practices in their title or abstract. This

differs from prior review papers that include empirical studies broadly touching on employee-rated HRM in their methodology section without really studying the theoretical and practical implications of HR perceptions. In addition, I only selected articles published in journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index in order to ensure that all the articles reviewed are of good quality. I captured a total of 172 articles related to employee perceptions of HRM, of which 15 are review articles and the rest are empirical studies.

I then screened through the 172 articles and identified a total of 25 empirical studies conducted in the Chinese context for a more in-depth systematic review. A total of 15 review and conceptual articles was excluded from the dataset because I wanted to situate the analysis of those studies on China within the full set of literature on the topic. This relatively small but emerging body of literature constitutes the largest concentration of country-specific studies on the topic, indicating that HRM in China has become an integral part of the global HRM research and a popular site for data collection. Most of the 25 articles were published in HRM and employment studies journals. This, to a large extent, reflects the general pattern of the small proportion of HRM studies in top-ranked management journals. I analysed these 25 articles which have implications for future research.

### **1.2.3 Research contributions**

Study One makes a number of contributions. First, Study One demonstrates that extant research mainly focuses on three distinct but inter-related dimensions: perceived HRM content (the content or “what” of the HR practices); HRM system strength (the process or “how” HR practices are delivered); and HRM attributions (the intent, or “why” HR practices exist) (Ostroff & Bowen 2016). When authors refer to the notion of HR perceptions, they may not mean the same dimensions: an increasing number of studies have confounded the HR perceptions with other related conceptualisations (Wang et al., 2020). Even in research exploring the same dimension,

the measurement scales used are incompatible and inconsistent, and the theoretical assumptions are characterised with idiosyncrasy and complexity.

Second, Study One revealed that the manner in which context is treated in previous studies tends to be somewhat superficial and unreflective. Many scholars only refer to the Chinese context by way of mentioning that that is where the research was undertaken, and then use it to interpret their research results. Indeed, identifying new contextual variables (e.g., novel institutional, organisational, and cultural contexts) can provide a promising momentum to augment the applicability of the extant HRM research (Luo et al., 2020). This can be described as the ‘theories in context’ approach, which focuses on examining the boundary conditions to extend extant theoretical paradigms (Whetten, 2009). Future research should also adopt the theories in context approach (Whetten, 2009) to building novel theories emerging from the Chinese context.

Third, in order to contextualise employee perceptions of HRM, Study One provides a number of future directions. For example, Study One calls for qualitative studies to go beyond interview methods and quantitative research to develop context-driven measurement scales which can really capture recent Chinese socio-economic development. Moreover, Study One suggests that future research should integrate multi-level theoretical paradigms (i.e., social network theory and institutional logics theory) to identify the organisational and institutional contexts (e.g., various components of societal contexts, organisational climate, interpersonal relationships, and occupational contexts) within which HR perceptions are framed. In addition, future research needs to examine HR perceptions across different employees, employment groups, and nations, with the aim of addressing the complex and context-specific nature of HR perceptions.

### **1.3 Study Two (Chapter 3)**

#### **1.3.1 Research motivation**

Most literature on HR perceptions, as part of the field of employee-centred HRM research, has paid insufficient attention to the antecedents to HR perceptions (Hewett, Shantz, & Mundy,

2019). This is a considerable research gap, as the limited understanding of the antecedents may present challenges for employers as they try to manage employees' HR perceptions effectively and promote ongoing employee well-being. Many psychological theorists suggest that the way in which individuals make attributions for HR practices is based on the features of the stimulus (HRM contents), situational factors (institutional arrangements, industrial environments, and organisational contexts), and between-person variability in perceptions (e.g., motivations, demographic backgrounds, and cultural values) (Hewett et al., 2018). Study Two (Chapter 3) investigates whether perceived benefits schemes are shaped by employees' Chinese traditionality, which is defined as an individual cultural trait that reveals the extent to which individuals subscribe to the traditional beliefs and values rooted in Chinese society (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997).

Study Two tests whether Chinese traditionality acts as an antecedent to perceived benefits schemes. As an individual-level construct, Chinese traditionality is defined as "the degree to which individuals endorse traditional Chinese values" (Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004, p. 234). It is well documented that traditionality affects employees' attitudinal and behavioural responses to their working environment (Hui et al., 2004).

In order to control for the heterogeneity of HR practices, I embed my hypotheses in a specific single HR practice (statutory benefits schemes in China) rather than the whole bundle of HR practices. I chose employees' perceptions of statutory benefits schemes in the Chinese context for a number of reasons. First, Chinese statutory benefits schemes (e.g., pension insurance, maternity insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, and housing funds) are designed to reduce employees' occupational risks and promote their quality of life (Lin, Trenberth, & Kelly, 2010), factors which are intimately linked to employee health and well-being. Second, although the benefits scheme is becoming a crucial dimension of HRM and attracting ever-growing interest from practitioners, academic research on employee benefits remains sporadic and sparse (Dulebohn, Molloy, Pichler, & Murray, 2009). Third, statutory

benefits are commonly provided in China, but the level and coverage of the benefits that employees receive may vary within and across firms (Lin et al., 2010). Based on the social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964) and conservation of resources (COR) framework (Hobfoll, 1989), Study Two (Chapter 3) offers novel insights into the mechanisms through which perceived statutory benefits schemes influence employee health and well-being (or emotional exhaustion) in the Chinese context.

According to social exchange theory, when an employing organisation provides employees with monetary and non-monetary benefits, employees tend to be more involved in their job and be more committed to their organisation in a reciprocal exchange (Casper & Harris, 2008). Based on the COR framework, employees are less likely to experience health issues (e.g., stress and burnout) when they are capable of achieving, protecting, and building objective or energy resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Energy resources at work could be characterised as positive psychological states, such as job involvement and work engagement (Shantz et al., 2016). Based on this line of reasoning, I propose the following hypotheses:

*H1: Employees' perceptions of benefits schemes are negatively related to emotional exhaustion.*

*H2: Employees' perceptions of benefits schemes are positively related to job involvement.*

*H3: Job involvement will partially mediate the relationship between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion.*

*H4: Chinese traditionality is positively related to employees' perceptions of benefits schemes.*

### **1.3.2 Research design**

#### **1.3.2.1 Data collection**

I collected data using both paper-based and web-based questionnaires in eight manufacturing companies, including four SOEs and four POEs.

The locations of these companies were in three places in China: Beijing, Suzhou, and Daqing. I studied companies in diverse regions in order to contribute to existing HRM literature in China



that focuses primarily on the developed coastal areas (Cooper, Wang, Bartram, & Cooke, 2019). I selected the manufacturing industry for three reasons: it is an important segment of the Chinese economy and global production (Guan & Frenkel, 2019); workers are relatively less well educated and the average wage of the industry is much lower than that of most other sectors; it also has a higher level of labour rights violation and labour disputes (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018; Zhu, Xie, Warner, & Guo, 2015). Benefit provision is therefore a valuable HR practice to employees. I chose Chinese SOEs and POEs as the research sites because they can provide a fertile ground for addressing a novel form of external HRM attributions (Labour Law attributions) in the Chinese context. Indeed, compared with SOEs, many non-state companies may not fully conform to the Labour Law in China (Friedman & Lee, 2010). In this regard, when employees perceive that HR practices are implemented to respond to the Labour Law, they will understand that the management provides them with job resources to protect their labour rights and promote their well-being. Table 1.1 presents the profile of these eight companies.

**Table 1.1 The profile of eight companies studied in this thesis**

Firm code	Ownership	Size	Location	Industry	HRM systems
1	POE	>200 employees	Suzhou	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
2	POE	>200 employees	Suzhou	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
3	POE	>200 employees	Suzhou	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
4	POE	>200 employees	Suzhou	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
5	SOE	>200 employees	Suzhou	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
6	SOE	>200 employees	Suzhou	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
7	SOE	>200 employees	Beijing	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems
8	SOE	>200 employees	Daqing	Manufacturing	Modern HRM systems

I gained access to these companies through personal networks. The purpose of the survey study was explained to the managers, and they helped me deliver and collect the questionnaires between May 2019 and January 2020. Asking managers to administer questionnaires is not unusual in the HRM field (e.g., Katou, Budhwar & Patel, 2014), especially when the information collected is deemed not sensitive to the management or company. The Chinese social relationship is one that is based on particularistic *guanxi* (Frenkel et al., 2012). Response rate tends to be low when employees are requested to fill in a survey by a stranger (the researcher). By contrast, they are more likely to respond when asked by someone whom they know. In order to ensure that this data collection method did not induce participants' positive feedback, my survey did not include questions that evaluated participants' perceptions of managerial behaviours. Given that participants' negative views were common in the surveys, I am confident that the response bias is not a serious concern.

All the survey questions were originally written in English and then a language expert fluent in both English and Chinese translated and back-translated (Brislin, 1970). Before administering the formal surveys, I asked four participants to complete a pilot survey and provide their informal feedback. After their feedback, I amended and finalised the questions to ensure their reliability, clarity and proper sequence.

The survey was conducted in two phases (one month apart). The first-wave questionnaire asked participants to provide their demographic details and rate their perceived benefits schemes, job involvement, and Chinese traditionality. All participants were informed that their identities were confidential and those participating were eligible to receive a gift from the researchers. In the six companies in Suzhou, paper-based questionnaires were hand-delivered randomly to participants. Each participant was asked to complete the questionnaire after work. In the company in Daqing and the company in Beijing, web-based questionnaires were distributed to participants via Wechat over a period of two weeks.

One month later, the second-wave questionnaire (either paper-based or web-based) asked participants to evaluate their degree of emotional exhaustion. Each participant was given a specific code number, which was used to match participants' second-wave results with their first-wave responses. Two-wave surveys can help reduce CMV (Podsakoff, McKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

#### **1.3.2.2 Data analysis**

I deployed structural equation modelling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 22.0 to assess my hypothesised model. SEM is considered a powerful multivariate data analysis technique, as it can simultaneously test a hypothesised model with both direct and indirect paths, provide the overall model fit, and minimise the biasing effects of measurement errors (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). According to Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step procedure, I first adopted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to specify and assess my measurement model. In line with previous studies (Kilroy, Flood, Bosak, & Chênevert, 2016), a number of fit indices were reported to evaluate model adequacy, including  $\chi^2$  goodness-of-fit test, the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

In the second step, structural models were established and tested. In order to explore the mediation effect, I compared the fit indices of a full mediation model with a partial mediation model. A bootstrapping method was employed to examine the indirect effect. I utilised bootstrapping with 95% confidence interval (CI) and 5,000 boot samples. The hypotheses are all supported.

#### **1.3.3 Research contributions**

Study Two makes a set of contributions. First, Study Two detects an antecedent of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. Employee perceptions of HR practices have attracted growing

interest from HR researchers in recent decades (Kilroy et al., 2016). Scholars in the HRM field have suggested that research on HR perceptions would benefit from building and testing the framework of HR antecedents (Hewett et al., 2018). Study Two revealed that the individual-level factor (Chinese traditionality) positively affected perceptions of benefits schemes.

Second, Study Two extends the literature on benefits by identifying the novel mediating processes between perceived benefits schemes and employee health well-being. The statutory benefits consist of a range of legally prescribed social insurance benefits, which are widely provided by organisations to their employees (Dulebohn et al., 2009). Despite their relevance to employees and employers, statutory benefits are largely neglected in prior research. Moreover, the mediating mechanisms through which benefits schemes effect employee outcomes remain unclear. Examining the role of mediator(s) is theoretically important. Proposing a novel mediator, namely, job involvement, allows for a richer theoretical assessment of how perceived benefits schemes give rise to employee well-being.

Third, most employee benefits literature is based on a western context (Lin et al., 2010), while my study casts light on the legally mandated benefits as perceived by employees in China. The distinctiveness of Chinese employees' cultural traits (e.g., traditionality, and high power distance) and China's socialist market economy could provide a valuable opportunity to test and extend the generalisability of existing research on employee benefits (Newman & Sheikh, 2012). The findings of Study Two add to this stream of evidence by illuminating the relationships between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion in Chinese enterprises.

## **1.4 Study Three (Chapter 4)**

### **1.4.1 Research motivation**

Nishii et al.'s (2008) seminal work laid the foundation of HRM attributions research by differentiating internal from external HRM attributions. Internal HRM attributions (e.g., well-

being attributions and exploiting attributions) are defined as employees' perceptions that HR practices are adopted as a function of management's voluntary intentions. In contrast, external HRM attributions (e.g., union compliance attributions) refer to employees' interpretations that HR practices are implemented in order to conform to external pressures which are beyond managerial control. Despite Nishii et al.'s (2008) call for identifying external attributions beyond union compliance, subsequent research focused mainly on internal HRM attributions rather than external attributions (Hewett et al., 2018).

In addition to HRM attributions, another stream of perceived HRM research, HRM system strength, also pays close attention to employee well-being. HRM system strength theory suggests that meta-features of HRM systems (distinctiveness, consistency and consensus) can enable employees to develop shared perceptions of the signals delivered by the HRM system, eliciting a strong work climate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Most prior work considered HRM system strength as an overall construct. However, a specific single meta-feature of HRM systems remains less explored. This is problematic, as different meta-features will not be equally effective in forming a strong climate (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). HRM system consistency represents an important meta-feature: a strong organisational climate context will emerge when employees perceive that messages delivered by the HRM system are consistent (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In a consistent HRM system climate, employees tend to be more motivated at work (Li, Sanders, & Frenkel, 2012). Conversely, an inconsistent HRM system represents a weak situation where employees may suffer from intense job-related stress because of cognitive confusion (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Responding to Hewett et al.'s (2018) call for combining these two distinct but inter-related perceived HRM theories, Study Three (Chapter 4) establishes an integrative framework which connects diverse forms of HRM attributions (both internal and external attributions) and a specific single meta-feature of HRM system strength (consistency) to employee well-being. First, drawing on the job demands–resources (JDR) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), I identify how distinct types of HRM attributions relate to employee well-being. Specifically, we

regard internal HRM well-being attributions as employees' perceptions that sufficient job resources which promote employee well-being are available within the organisation. In contrast, internal HRM exploiting attributions are considered to be employees' interpretations that there are extensive job demands which have detrimental impacts on well-being. Moreover, I propose a novel form of external HRM attributions — external Labour Law attributions — which refer to employees' attributions that HR practices are implemented to comply with the Labour Law. I explore Labour Law attributions in China because many non-state companies may not fully conform to the Labour Law in China (Friedman & Lee, 2010). In fact, multitudes of migrant workers have been suffering from occupational injuries and may not be fully covered by social insurance, though social insurance is mandatory under the 1994 Labour Law (Zhu, Chen, & Zhao, 2014). In this regard, when employees perceive that HR practices are implemented to respond to the Labour Law, they will understand that the management provides them with job resources to protect their labour rights and promote their well-being. By differentiating internal attributions from external Labour Law attributions based on their distinct implications for employee well-being, Study Three extends existing literature focusing mainly on internal HRM attributions.

Second, I propose that HRM attributions determine employee well-being because they activate the motivational process. Thriving at work is defined a positive motivational state which evaluates individuals' joint sense of vitality and learning (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). By evaluating whether thriving at work acts as a motivational pathway, Study Three seeks to identify the underlying mechanisms through which HRM attributions influence well-being.

Third, I focus on an individual meta-feature (HRM system consistency), rather than the overall HRM system strength, as a potential boundary condition for the relationship between HRM attributions and employee outcomes. In effect, a consistent HRM system context can predict employees' vigour, dedication to, and absorption in their work by offering unambiguous, valid and stable HR messages (Li et al., 2012). By assessing whether HRM system consistency operates as an important contingency affecting the impact of HRM attributions, Study Three sheds light

on the context-driven nature of HRM perceptions (Wang et al., 2020). A moderated mediated model is established.

## **1.4.2 Research design**

### **1.4.2.1 Data collection**

Data in Study Three were collected from eight manufacturing firms located in three cities (Beijing, Daqing and Suzhou) in China during 2019-2020. We used personal connection to approach senior or HR managers to facilitate the distribution of the surveys to participants with a time lag of one month. Asking managers to administer surveys is quite common in China (Li et al., 2017), in part due to the fact that employees tend not to respond to researchers who do not know them, but are more likely to respond to requests from their managers. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed in the six firms located in Suzhou. In the two firms based in Daqing and Beijing, managers used Wechat to forward web-based surveys to participants. In order to ensure that our results are reliable, the purpose of this academic research was explained to managers and they were asked to encourage participants to reflect their views accurately in their responses. Furthermore, participants were assured that the questionnaires were anonymous, and that their answers would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes. To incentivise participation in the survey and elicit truthful answers, participants were offered the opportunity to win a small gift after they completed the questionnaire.

At Time 1, the questionnaire asked the participants to offer their demographic details (e.g., age, gender, educational background, and tenure) and report HRM attributions, HRM system consistency, and thriving at work. In firms in Suzhou, 251 participants completed the paper-based questionnaires. In firms in Beijing and Daqing, web-based questionnaires were received from 180 respondents. A total of 431 questionnaires were received for Time 1.

One month later (Time 2), managers invited the same participants to complete either the paper-based or the web-based questionnaire which assessed employee well-being. Managers helped us carefully match participants' second-wave answers with their first-wave responses.

#### **1.4.2.2 Data analysis**

Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), I adopted the steps proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) coupled with bootstrapping methods to test for mediation. Moreover, in line with prior work (Cafferkey, Heffernan, Harney, Dundon, & Townsend, 2019), I utilised Model 7 of the PROCESS macro tool based on the bootstrapping methods to explore the moderated hypotheses. Four covariates, including employee age, gender, education and tenure, were included in all hypothesised models. All variables were centred to minimise multicollinearity. I verified my models by using 5,000 bootstraps and a 95 percent confidence interval.

Before testing the hypotheses, I performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS to evaluate whether the measurement scales used in this present study are distinct from each other. The hypothesised six-factor measurement model included all constructs. In order to maintain a good indicator-to-factor ratio and reduce measurement errors (Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000), I created five parcels of indicators for thriving at work and HRM system consistency, and three parcels of indicators for the remaining variables. Specifically, the two items with the strongest and weakest factor loadings were parcelled, and then the two items with the second strongest and weakest factor loadings were parcelled, and so on.

Since all the variables used in the current research were reported by the same group of subjects, I need to assess the potential risk of common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Following Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) procedures, I added an unmeasured latent method factor to our proposed measurement model to examine whether it significantly improved the fit statistics. The results indicated that the chi-square difference test between our original measurement model and the latent method factor model was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2(df) = 110(22)$ ,  $p <$



0.05). However, it is argued that chi-square values are sensitive to large numbers of sample sizes and variables (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2014). I thus used the difference of CFI values as suggested by Byrne (2001) to evaluate the overall model fit improvement. The change of CFI values between our original measurement model and the latent method factor model was 0.021, which is below the threshold of 0.05 (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2013). The result revealed that the introduction of a latent method factor did not significantly improve our model fit. Therefore, the potential CMB may not be a serious concern.

### **1.4.3 Research contributions**

Study Three makes several contributions. First, it advances our understanding of the differential influences of internal and external HRM attributions on employee well-being, particularly the latter, which remains under-investigated. Identifying employees' external HRM attributions is important because of the context-specific nature of perceived HRM (Wang et al., 2020). In line with prior research, my results revealed that internal well-being attributions have a positive effect on employee well-being, while there is a negative relationship between internal exploiting attributions and well-being. Contrary to previous work suggesting that external HRM attributions did not exert a significant influence on employee outcomes (Nishii et al., 2008), Study Three found that Labour Law attributions show a significantly positive relationship with employee well-being.

Second, Study Three establishes a framework combining two distinct streams of perceived HRM research in order to examine the organisational climate conditions (HRM system consistency) under which the effect of HRM attributions on thriving at work are maximised. Indeed, employees' HRM attributions are not only based on the internal features of the stimulus per se (e.g., HR practices) but also the external context of the stimulus (Hewett et al., 2018). I found that HRM system consistency moderated the relationship between internal HRM attributions and thriving at work. Contrary to my expectation, the interaction of external HRM

attributions (Labour Law attributions) and HRM system consistency does not make a significant impact on thriving at work. Although previous literature proposed that two different streams of perceived HRM could become complementary and team up to exert impacts upon employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Hewett et al., 2018), my results indicate that the organisational climate context and external HRM attributions might work in silos to influence thriving at work.

Third, I adopted the motivational mechanisms of the Jobs Demand Resources (JDR) model in explaining the motivational processes through which HRM attributions influence employee well-being, namely, through shaping employees' thriving at work. In doing so, I heeded Boxall, Guthrie, and Paauwe's (2016) suggestion that more attention should be paid to employee-related mediators when researching employee well-being in HRM.

### **1.5 Overall contribution of the thesis (Chapter 5)**

Overall, this thesis extends existing literature by unveiling the relationship between perceived HRM and employee well-being in the Chinese context. First, this thesis draws upon comprehensive theoretical perspectives (COR, social exchange theory, and JDR theories) to theorise the association between perceived HRM and employee well-being. An innovation of my thesis is that I highlight the motivational pathway to cast light on the mediating impacts of job-related mindsets (job involvement and thriving at work) on employee well-being (see Study Two and Study Three respectively). Second, my thesis contextualises employees' HRM perceptions by focusing on a China-specific antecedent of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes, namely Chinese traditionality. Scholars in the HRM community have suggested that research on HRM perceptions would benefit from building and testing the framework of HR antecedents (Hewett et al., 2018). Study One has identified a set of contextual variables which may shape the way in which employees develop their perceptions of HR practices. These include, for instance: Confucian cultural values, business and political systems at the institutional level; organisational

strategies, and employment modes at the organisational level; and past work experience, demographic and cognitive factors at the individual level. Based on an empirical study, I revealed that the individual-level factor (Chinese traditionality) positively affects perceived benefits schemes (see Study Two). Third, my thesis advances our understanding of the context-specific nature of HRM perceptions by differentiating internal from external Labour Law attributions based on their disparate implications for employee well-being (see Study Three). Fourth, I address Hewett et al.'s (2018) observation of a paucity of research which combines two distinct but interconnected streams of research (HRM attributions and HRM system strength) into one general framework in accounting for the joint impacts of perceived HRM on employee outcomes. This is the main focus of Study Three.

## **Chapter 2. Contextualising employee perceptions of human resource management: A review of China-based literature and future directions**

As noted in the thesis declaration (page xii), this chapter has been published in *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*. Authors are Qijie Xiao and Fang Lee Cooke.

Xiao, Q., & Cooke, F. L. (2020). Contextualising employees' perceptions of human resource management: A review of China-based literature and future directions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*. DOI: 10.1111/1744-7941.12259

### **2.1 Introduction**

The notion of employee perception of HRM has received considerable attention in recent years (Beijer et al., 2019). The basic assumption underlying the research on perceived HRM is that it is the *employee perceptions* of HR practices (rather than the contents of HRM) that are closely associated with employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, which, collectively, can lead to desired organisational outcomes (e.g. Jiang et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2009).

The concept of HR perceptions is not monolithic (Wang et al., 2020). Thus far, HR perceptions studies have moved in three directions: perceived HRM content (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff 2004), and HRM attributions (Nishii et al., 2008). While several reviews (Beijer et al., 2019; Hewett et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020) have shed light on the developments in this field of research, they were general reviews without highlighting advances in a specific country context. Given the increasing call for considering context in HRM research (e.g., Cooke, 2018; Kaufman, 2015) and that research on HRM in China has developed rapidly in recent years, it will be beneficial to conduct a systematic review to take stock of what we know and what limitations there are in extant research in order to facilitate future research in this area. Such a review may also have relevance to other country contexts.

This review study extends extant review literature by making two main contributions. First, I reviewed China-based studies to shed light on the extent to which employee perceptions of HRM have been framed in the Chinese context. I identified a number of contextual variables at multiple

levels. These include, for example: Confucian cultural values, business and political environments at the institutional level; organisational background, firm strategies, and employment modes at the organisational level; leader-member exchange and interactions among coworkers at the interpersonal level; and demographic and cognitive factors at the individual level. Although Nishii and Wright's (2008) seminal work proposes that numerous organisational, team, and individual-level factors can drive employee perceptions of HR practices, only a small number of studies take the antecedents into consideration. After a systematic review of extant literature on the antecedents of HR perceptions, I accentuate the impacts of multi-level contextual factors (e.g., various components of societal contexts, organisational climate, interpersonal relationships, and occupational contexts) on the formation of HR perceptions. The revelation of contextual factors in HR perceptions is important in view of the decontextualised trend of HRM research (Kaufman, 2015).

Second, this study provides a systematical review of China-based empirical studies (including domestic and foreign multinational firms operating in China) published in English journals on HR perceptions in order to highlight advances in a specific country context. In doing so, I aim to heed the call for considering context in HRM research (Cooke, 2018). Such a review may also have relevance to other country contexts (e.g., western countries) and can advance my insight into cross-national and cross-cultural research on this topic.

My review study is guided by the following set of questions:

1. How are HR perceptions conceptualised and operationalised in extant research in the Chinese context?
2. To what extent do the three dimensions of HR perceptions (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions) distinct from or connect with each other?
3. What contextual factors have been examined to influence HR perceptions?
4. What opportunities exist for future research to advance the field?

## 2.2 Methods of data collection and analysis

I followed three steps to collect articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals in English (excluding book chapters and conference proceedings). First, the first author searched the university library databases, including Wiley, Emerald, EBSCO, ProQuest, JSTOR, SAGE and Springer, using the keyword search terms in their title or abstract: “HR perception”, “perceived HR(M)”, “employee perception of HR(M)”, “experience of HR(M)”, “report of HR(M)”, “HR(M) system strength”, “strength of HR(M) system”, “HR(M) attribution”, “HR(M) process.”

Second, I carefully screened all the articles generated from the first step and only included articles clearly discussing employee perceptions of HR practices in their title or abstract. This differs from prior review papers that include empirical studies broadly touching on employee-rated HRM in their methodology section without really studying the theoretical and practical implications of HR perceptions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, I only selected articles published in journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index in order to ensure that all the articles reviewed are of good quality. I captured a total of 172 articles related to employee perceptions of HRM, of which 15 are review articles and the remaining empirical studies.

I then screened through the 172 articles and identified a total of 25 empirical studies conducted in the Chinese context for a more in-depth systematic review. I adopted this process because I wanted to situate the analysis of those studies on China within the full set of literature on the topic. This relatively small but emerging body of literature constitutes the largest concentration of country-specific studies on the topic, indicating that HRM in China has become an integral part of the global HRM research and a popular site for data collection (see Table 2.1).

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<sup>2</sup> Previous review articles (Beijer et al., 2019; Hewett et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020) focused primarily on top HRM-dedicated and management journals, and the number of articles they reviewed are 65, 72, and 105 respectively. Some of the reviews included book chapters and articles that only touched upon the topic.

Most of the 25 articles were published in HRM and employment studies journals (see Table 2.2). This, to a large extent, reflects the general pattern of the small proportion of HRM studies in top-ranked management journals. I analyse these 25 articles with implications for future research.

**Table 2.2 Number and country/region of empirical studies of HR perceptions (N=157)**

No. of studies	Country/region of studies
25	China
22	UK
19	Netherlands
10	Unspecified: studies without specifying the countries or regions where their data was collected
8	Australia, Canada
7	Norway
6	Ireland, Taiwan
5	Belgium, Portugal
4	South Korea, Spain, USA
3	Germany, Greece, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, Turkey
2	Brazil, Europe, Finland, France, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Thailand
1	Colombia, Denmark, Fuji, Ghana, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Mexico, Nigeria, North America, Oman, Pakistan, Poland, Serbia, Switzerland, Tanzania

Note: Some studies collected data from multiple countries/regions; some studies did not specify where the data was collected.



**Table 3.2 List of academic journals which published the sample articles included in this systematic review (N=25)**

Type of journals	Journal titles	No of articles
HRM and employment studies journals	<i>The International Journal of Human Resource Management</i> (8); <i>Human Resource Management</i> (4); <i>Employee Relations</i> (2); <i>Personnel Review</i> (2); <i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i> (1); <i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i> (1); <i>International Journal of Manpower</i> (1)	19
General management journals	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i> (1); <i>Asian Business &amp; Management</i> (1); <i>Chinese Management Studies</i> (1); <i>European Journal of International Management</i> (1); <i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i> (1);	5
Psychology and organisational behaviour journals	<i>Social Behaviour and Personality</i> (1)	1

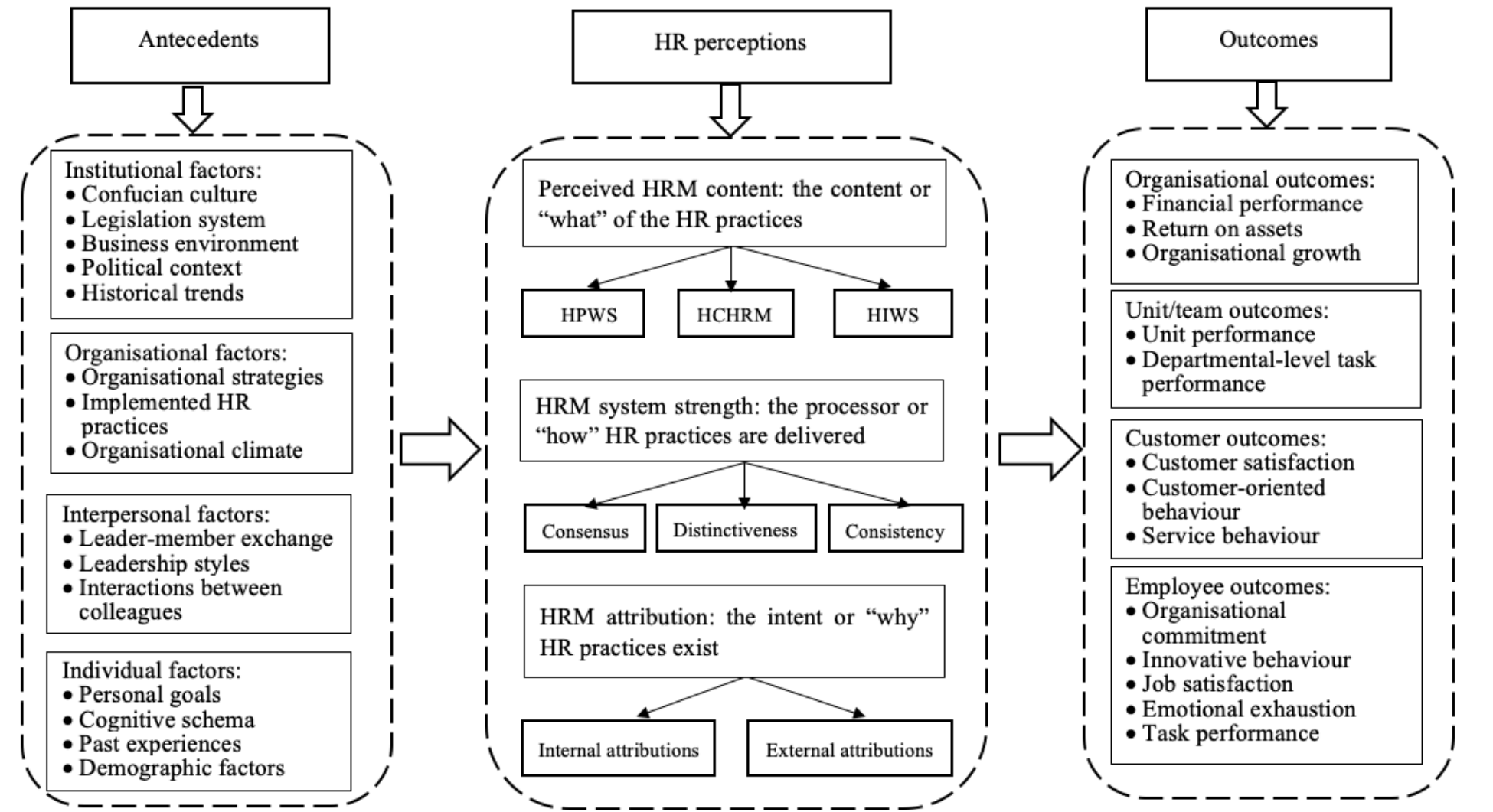
### **2.3 Research on employee perceptions of HRM in the Chinese context**

There is considerable idiosyncrasy in the conceptualisation and measurement of HR perceptions (Beijer et al., 2019). Prior work has categorised HR perceptions into three distinct but inter-related dimensions: perceived HRM content (the content or “what” of the HR practices); HRM system strength (the process or “how” HR practices are delivered); and HRM attributions (the intent, or “why” of HR practices) (Ostroff & Bowen, 2014). When authors refer to the notion of HR perceptions, they may not mean the same dimensions: an increasing number of studies have confounded the HR perceptions with other related conceptualisations (Wang et al., 2020). Even in research exploring the same dimension, the measurement scales used are incompatible and inconsistent, and the theoretical assumptions are characterised with idiosyncrasy and complexity (see Table 2.3 for a comparison).

**Table 2.4 A comparison of perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions dimensions**

	Theoretical underpinning	Basic assumption	Measurement
Perceived HRM content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological contract (Rousseau, 2001)</li> <li>• Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964)</li> </ul>	Employees will respond in attitudes and behaviours to the organisation based on their perceptions of the signals conveyed by the content of HR practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Descriptive versus evaluative approaches</li> <li>• Observation-based versus experience-based approaches</li> <li>• Summated rating versus force choice approaches</li> </ul>
HRM system strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kelly's (1973) covariation model within attribution theory</li> </ul>	Nine meta-features foster HRM systems to create a strong organisational climate wherein HR practices deliver unambiguous messages to employees, thereby shared perceptions of climate emerge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainly borrowing Delmotte, De Winne and Sels's (2012) scales</li> </ul>
HRM attributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attribution theory (Heider 1958; Weiner 1985)</li> </ul>	Employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes depend on the attributions they make about managers' motivations to put the actual HR practices into practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainly borrowing Nishii et al.'s (2008) scales</li> </ul>

Following previous work (Wang et al., 2020), I adopted the general categorisation (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength and HRM attributions) to organise my research findings. Because my review article focuses on the Chinese context and informs future research on context-specific HR perception, I also place an emphasis on a variety of contextual conditions upon which employees form their perceptions of HR practices, as illuminated in a context-oriented framework (see Figure 2.1). In the following section, I will demonstrate the theoretical underpinning, basic assumptions, measurement scales and research foci of the empirical studies. A summary of empirical research on HR perceptions in China is displayed in the Appendix.



**Figure 2.1 A context-oriented framework of employee perceptions of HRM in China.**

Note: HPWS: high-performance work system; HCHRM: high-commitment human resource management; HIWS: high-involvement work system

## **2.4 Perceived HRM content: the content or “what” of the HR practices**

### **2.4.1 Theoretical underpinning and basic assumptions**

Research on perceived HRM content is concerned with the extent to which employees, rather than managers, agree or disagree that individual HR practices or HR bundles are available within organisations (Jiang et al., 2017). Some studies also examined the extent to which employees are satisfied with the content of individual HR practices or HR bundles (Guan & Frenkel, 2019). A single HR practice may encompass retention-oriented compensation (Lam, Chen, & Takeuchi, 2009), training (Guan & Frenkel, 2019), and reward for creativity (Li et al., 2017), whereas HR bundles include multiple incarnations, such as high-performance work systems (HPWS) (Ali et al., 2019), control and commitment HRM (Ma et al., 2016), and socially responsible HRM (Shen & Zhu, 2011). The theoretical underpinning in this line of research is based on signalling theory (Den Hartog et al., 2013), psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 2001), and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) (Wang et al., 2020).

### **2.4.2 Measurement of perceived HRM content**

Prior work tends to favour a *universalistic* perspective for operationalising and measuring the perceived HRM content, regardless of the context. A number of measurement approaches are utilised to capture the perceived HRM content (see Table 2.4).

**Table 2.5 A summary of measurement approaches of studies of HRM perceptions in China**

Dimensions of HRM perceptions	Main measurement approach	Examples of measurement items	Examples of studies using the items
Perceived HRM content	Descriptive measures of perceived HRM content (Beijer et al. 2019): observable assessments of HR practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To get my job here, I needed to take an interview (Li and Rees 2019)</li> <li>• We have programs in this organisation that reward individual creativity (Li et al. 2017)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Li et al. (2017)</li> <li>• Li and Rees (2019)</li> </ul>
	Evaluative measures of perceived HRM content (Beijer et al. 2019): affectively laden evaluations of HR practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual performance in the job is important in determining the wages of employees in our company (Lam et al. 2013)</li> <li>• Pay in my firm is competitive in the industry (Shen and Leggett 2014)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lam et al. (2013)</li> <li>• Shen and Leggett (2014)</li> </ul>
	Observation-based HR measures (Wang et al. 2020): evaluating employee perceptions of the existence of HR practices by regarding respondents as the third-person observers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This company prefers to promote from within the company (Li and Frenkel 2017)</li> <li>• The branch makes a great effort to select the right person (Jiang et al. 2017)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Li and Frenkel (2017)</li> <li>• Jiang et al. (2017)</li> </ul>
	Experience-based HR measures (Wang et al. 2020): assessing the content of HRM as directly experienced by employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I regularly receive development-focused performance appraisals in my firm (Liu et al. 2017)</li> <li>• I am fairly rewarded for the amount of effort I put forth (Shen and Leggett 2014)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liu et al. (2017)</li> <li>• Shen and Leggett (2014)</li> </ul>
	Summated rating measures (this study): employees are asked to provide their ratings about each item	<p>Employees' responses range from <i>strongly agree</i> to <i>strongly disagree</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My firm has offered me a pledge of employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liu et al. (2017)</li> <li>• Shen and Zhu (2011)</li> </ul>

	pertaining to a particular HR dimension	<p>security (Liu et al. 2017)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My firm ensures equal opportunity in HRM (Shen and Zhu 2011)</li> </ul>	
	Forced choice measures (this study): involves a more cognitive load on respondents by asking them to offer yes/no responses	Employees have to make decision trade-offs (yes/no responses).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>
HRM system strength	Delmotte, De Winne and Sels (2012): 31 items to capture distinctiveness, consistency and consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility (Employees are regularly informed about the initiatives taken by the HR department)</li> <li>• Instrumentality (The HR practices in this organisation do not contribute to employees' motivation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jia et al. (2018): Directly borrowed the scales</li> </ul>
	Frenkel, Li and Restubog (2012): 10 items to assess distinctiveness, consistency and consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility (HR practices here are clearly communicated to employees)</li> <li>• Instrumentality (HR practices here help me a great deal to develop my knowledge and skills)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guan and Frenkel (2019): Extended the original item scales (12 items)</li> </ul>
	Hauff, Alewell and Hansen (2017): 7 items to measure visibility, intensity, and clarity et.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility (Employees know the HRM targets and practices)</li> <li>• Clarity (Employees understand HRM targets and practices)</li> <li>• Internal consistency (All HR practices are consistent with one another)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yan et al. (2019): Adapted seven items</li> <li>• Jia et al. (2020): Adapted seven items</li> </ul>
	Nishii et al. (2008): Five-factor structure of attributions (25 items)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal well-being HRM attributions (My company pays its employees what it does so that employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chen and Wang (2014): Adapted</li> </ul>

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HRM attributions	<p>will feel valued and respected)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal exploiting HRM attributions (My company pays its employees what it does in order to get the most work out of employees)</li> <li>• External union compliance attribution (My company pays its employees what it does because they are required by the union contract)</li> </ul>	<p>commitment- and control-focused attribution measurement (8 items)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lee et al. (2019): Borrowed employee well-being attribution measurement (5 items)</li> </ul>
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Beijer and her colleagues (2019), for instance, identified descriptive versus evaluative measures of perceived HRM content. Descriptive and factual constructs, as they suggested, reflect cognitively based perceptions of an event and object (e.g., the HRM content). Sample items include “In our company, training programmes are conducted by professionals and experienced managers or trainers” (Lam et al., 2009, p. 2261). In contrast, evaluative and subjective constructs refer to affectively laden evaluations of the HRM content (Beijer et al., 2019). Sample items include “Pay in my firm is competitive in the industry” (Shen & Leggett, 2014, p. 173).

The second approach, which distinguishes observation-based and experience-based measures of the perceived HRM content, is proposed by Wang et al. (2020). Observation-based measurement evaluates employee perceptions of the existence of HR practices by regarding respondents as third-person observers, whereas experience-based measurement refers to items assessing the content of HRM as directly experienced by the respondents (Wang et al., 2020).

The aforementioned measurements are mainly summated ratings, also known as the Likert scale (7-point or 5-point). Each measurement item is a statement pertaining to a particular HR dimension. For example: “My firm has offered me a pledge of employment security” (Liu et al., 2017, p.1172). Employees are required to specify a response choice (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) which best reflects their opinion about the statement. However, the forced choice scale has seldom been used to capture the perceived HRM content. The forced choice measurement places a bigger cognitive load on respondents by asking them to offer *yes/no* responses (Pavlov, Maydeu-Olivares, & Fairchild, 2019). The forced choice measurement is acknowledged to reduce the response biases rooted in the summated rating approach, in that it forces respondents to make decision trade-offs in an honest fashion (Wetzel, Böhnke, & Brown, 2016). I cannot tell with any certainty whether the forced choice approach outperforms the summated rating one (Likert scale measurement). In fact, the adoption of one approach over another should depend on the particular research context (e.g., high-stakes situations), and the motivation of respondents (Pavlov et al., 2019). I thus suggest that the measurement development

should be contingent on the empirical questions, research hypothesis, theoretical paradigms, and the organisational context, to reflect the context-specific nature of employee perceptions of the HRM content.

### **2.4.3 Empirical research on the perceived HRM content**

There are 14 articles empirically examining employees' perceived HRM content in the Chinese context. First, a number of articles centre on the relationship between manager-rated (implemented) HRM and employee-rated (perceived) HRM (e.g., Ali et al., 2019; Li & Frenkel, 2017). Specifically, there is a positive association between manager-rated and employee-rated HRM, because manager-rated HRM represents the implemented HR practices, which provide the organisational context within which employee interpretations of HRM are produced and reinforced (Jiang et al., 2017). These studies primarily adopted a *universalistic* perspective and did not consider the specific role of Chinese context in shaping the differences between manager- and employee-rated HRM. Indeed, Chinese employees tend to have a higher level of power-distance cultural value, indicating that Chinese employees will show submission and deference to authority figures to a greater extent than their western counterparts (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). Future research may adopt a cross-cultural perspective to examine whether employee-rated (perceived) HRM will be more likely to be influenced by manager-rated (implemented) HRM in the Chinese context than in the western context.

Second, existing studies have made good efforts to identify a number of mediating and moderating variables in the relationship between employee HR perceptions and employee outcomes. The mediating role of a set of work-related states of mind has been examined, such as creativity-related intrinsic motivation (Li et al., 2017) and job crafting (Guan & Frenkel, 2018). The moderators include firm ownership (Liu et al., 2017) and challenge and threat appraisal (Li et al., 2017). Most of these mediators and moderators are *universalistic* constructs without Chinese elements. Shen and Leggett's (2014) study is an exception. They cast light on the

moderating role of Chinese official household registration status (*hukou*) on the relationship between perceived HRM and organisational justice. Their findings can deepen our understanding of how status-conferring identities (e.g., *hukou* identity) vary across national contexts (Li & Frenkel, 2017). Future studies are encouraged to take a *contingency* perspective to investigate many other context-specific variations as potential moderators, such as Confucian cues, socio-economic development, political ideology, and business-to-government networks. This may offer novel insights into context-specific theorising in HR perceptions research in the Chinese context.

## **2.5 HRM system strength: the process, or “how” HR practices are delivered**

### **2.5.1 Theoretical underpinning and basic assumptions**

Based on a systems approach and a strategic perspective on HRM, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) introduced the framework of “HRM system strength” to explore the HRM-performance relationship. It is a multilevel construct in the sense that it considers HR practices as a system, which can motivate individuals to adopt appropriate attitudes and behaviours, which, in the aggregated way, lead to organisational effectiveness. Moreover, organisational climate is defined as a significant mediating variable in the HRM—performance linkage. Drawing from Kelley’s (1973) covariation model within attribution theory, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) proposed nine meta-features of HRM systems. Specifically, distinctiveness (visibility, understandability, legitimacy of authority, and relevance), consistency (instrumentality, validity, and consistent HRM messages), and consensus (agreement among principal HRM decision makers, and fairness) foster HRM systems to create a strong organisational climate in which HR practices deliver unambiguous messages to employees; thereby, shared perceptions, rather than idiosyncratic perceptions of climate, emerge (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

### 2.5.2 Measurement of HRM system strength

All of the prior work used quantitative methods. The way HRM system strength has been operationalised appears to be dispersed and decontextualised. Studies in the Chinese context tend to directly borrow a bundle of self-report items that has been well developed and validated in the western context (see Table 3). This may generate several problems.

First, the manner in which context is captured, if at all, is rather superficial and unreflective. Many scholars did not identify the complex and qualitatively distinct contexts in their measurement of HRM system strength. Instead, they only refer to the Chinese context by way of mentioning that is where the research was undertaken, and then use it to interpret their research results. In other words, they are inclined to examine the boundary conditions to extend extant theoretical paradigms (i.e., “theories in context”), rather than building novel theories (i.e., “theories of context”) (Whetten, 2009).

Second, the same feature of HRM system strength is often measured by distinct scales. For example, Jia, Yan, Cai and Liu (2018) captured *visibility* by using Delmotte, De Winne and Sels’s (2012) scales. Sample items include “Employees are regularly informed about the initiatives taken by the HR department” (Delmotte, De Winne, & Sels, 2012, p. 1489). In contrast, Guan and Frenkel (2019) assessed *visibility* by borrowing Frenkel, Li and Restubog’s (2012) measurement scale. An example is “HR practices here are clearly communicated to employees” (Frenkel, Li, & Restubog, 2012, p. 129). The inconsistencies and variances in the measurement may yield differential empirical results, and thus cause problems in comparing the observed relationships among studies.

Third, a number of scholars measured employee perceptions of meta-features of HRM system strength at the individual level at the expense of a concern for contextual cues. This is a considerable gap, given that “HRM system strength is a higher-level construct that is a contextual property of the unit or organisation” (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016, p. 197). HRM system strength research in general has made an effort to focus on HRM system strength at higher levels of

analysis (Dello Russo, Mascia, & Morandi, 2018). Sanders, Dorenbosch and de Reuver (2008), for example, used multiple data sources to measure the three dimensions of HRM system strength. Specifically, distinctiveness was assessed within employees' questionnaires; consistency was measured as agreement among respondents on HR practices, and consensus was measured within line and HRM managers' questionnaire. In doing so, they aimed at capturing different features of HRM system strength at the unit level. Future research in the Chinese context may benefit by following their approach and treating HRM system strength as a context-driven variable at the collective level.

### **2.5.3 Empirical research on HRM system strength**

Previous studies typically regarded the meta-features of HRM system strength as a uniform configuration to take stock of the HRM—performance linkages. The role of HRM system strength has been widely discussed in the “antecedent-mediator-moderator-outcome” framework. First, there is a burgeoning stream of literature on the role of HRM system strength as antecedent to individual and organisational outcomes (e.g. Li, Frenkel, & Sanders, 2011; Jia et al., 2020). Second, a sizable proportion of studies have investigated whether HRM system strength, as a uniform system, moderates the linkages between HR practices and individual (or organisational) outcomes (Guan & Frenkel, 2019; Sanders et al., 2018). Third, I did not find a study examining HRM system strength as a mediator of the association between HR practices and individual or organisational performance. This may be an important research gap, given that Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) original article postulated that HRM system strength mediates the relationships between HRM and performance. Fourth, insufficient attention has been paid to the Chinese contextual factors which drive employee perceptions of features of the HRM system. I thus make a call to identify the Chinese contextual cues (e.g., historical trends, political environment, and socio-economic contexts) of HRM system strength (see future research avenues for more discussions on antecedents).

In general, prior literature has primarily explored HRM system strength within the “antecedent-mediator-moderator-outcome” framework and assumed that multiple important meta-features are the basis of contributing to a strong system. However, researchers seldom explored how different features could interconnect with each other and operate together in interdependent ways. This is a considerable gap, given the different configurations of HRM strength features (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Do these different features stand alone to predict individual or organisational performance? Are there overlaps and inter-linkages between these features? Under what conditions can certain features mutually reinforce and support each other? It would be interesting for future research to address these questions.

## **2.6 HRM attributions: The intent, or “why” HR practices are in place**

### **2.6.1 Theoretical underpinning and basic assumptions**

Building on the perceived HRM content dimension which focuses on *whether* a specific set of HR practices is perceived by employees as available in organisations, Nishii, Lepak, and Schneider (2008) went further and developed a more affectively laden framework: HRM attribution framework. At the heart of HRM attribution framework is the argument that employees’ attitudinal and behavioural outcomes depend on the attributions they make about managers’ motivations for putting the actual HR practices into effect. A certain degree of positive or negative value may be attached to the attribution of HR practices.

Based on attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985), Nishii et al. (2008) identified a five-factor structure of attributions; four of them are internal attributions (e.g., enhancing quality, keeping costs down, improving employee well-being, and exploiting employees) and one of them is external (complying with the union requirement). Internal attribution refers to the interpretation that HR practices are implemented as a function of managers’ *voluntary* intentions and motivations. By contrast, external attribution is connected with the perception that managers are *passive* recipients, and that HR practices are adopted due to external and environmental constraints, which are beyond managers’ control. Nishii et al. (2008) concluded that internal

attributions have effects upon employee outcomes, whereas external attributions are not significantly related to employees' attitudes and behaviours.

### **2.6.2 Measurement of HRM attributions**

Nishii et al.'s (2008) pioneering measurement approach has gained prominence and inspired a wave of follow-up research in general and in the Chinese context. For example, Chen and Wang (2014) used a four-item scale adapted from Nishii et al. (2008) to measure employees' cost-reduction attributions for four fundamental HR practices (training, compensation, benefits, and scheduling). Sample items included: "Our company provides employees with the training that it does to try to keep costs down" (Chen & Wang, 2014, p. 1436). Similarly, Sanders, Yang and Li (2019) captured HRM cost-reduction attributions by developing Nishii et al.'s (2008) five-item scale. An example item is: "Training is implemented in our organisation in this way in order to keep costs down" (Sanders, Yang, & Li, 2019, p. 16). Overall, Chinese studies tended to directly borrow from Nishii et al.'s (2008) measurement scales while relatively neglecting the comprehensive and context-specific measure of HRM attributions in China. Again, this reflects the decontextualised trend of perceived HRM research (Wang et al., 2020).

Moreover, current studies rely heavily on the measurement of internal attributions and show limited sensitivity to contextual attributions. External and contextual attributions may be at play when the environmental information is salient and paramount in a certain, specific organisational setting (Peters, O'Connorm, & Rudolf, 1980). I therefore suggest that future research on China should develop context-specific measurement scales which highlight the Chinese context specifically. Hewett, Shantz and Mundy's (2019) approach is a good example. They adopted an inductive approach (i.e., semi-structured interviews and pilot surveys) to reframe the external HRM attributions construct in the British academic context. The additional external HRM attribution they identified is external reporting compliance (comprising three items). In fact, the way in which individuals make attributions of stimulus is not only linked to the *internal*

characteristics of the stimulus per se (e.g., HR practices), but also to the *external* contexts within which it functions (Hewett et al., 2018). More particularly, individuals are likely to be aware of external causes of a stimulus when the situational and contextual variables are salient and informative to them (Mitchell & Kalb, 1982). Given that Chinese employees may be more subject to situational and collective pressures (Hofstede, 1980), it is important for future research on China to identify the external HRM attributions with Chinese characteristics.

### **2.6.3 Empirical research on HRM attributions**

There are three studies (Chen & Wang, 2014; Lee et al., 2020; Sanders, Yang, & Li, 2019) based on the Chinese context to elucidate the employees' HRM attributions. Nevertheless, they did not take a cross-cultural perspective, since the attribution categories together with measurement scales were similar to the Western-based research. Their findings echo Nishii and her colleagues' (2008) earlier contention that internal attributions play an important role in affecting employees' attitudes and behaviours. Situational and external attributions in the Chinese context have not been taken into consideration.

Classic attribution theory has placed heavy emphasis on differences in attributions across cultures. More specifically, people in individualistic cultures tend to use dispositional and internal attributions to explain their motivations, attitudes and behaviours, whereas individuals in collectivist societies are likely to make more situationally oriented attributions, such as external norms, cultural cues, and collective values (Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006). In individualist cultures, people are normally socialised to understand that they should be liable for their own actions and behaviours. On the other hand, individuals in societies with collectivist cultures (e.g., China) are expected to downplay individual independence and difference (Martinko & Douglas, 1999). Members of collectivist societies are inclined to attend to situational information and contextual cues to internalise their cultural norms and develop a collective sense of self (Earley, 1989). As a consequence, response to societal pressures and other collective forces is more



prevalent than in the individualistic context. Therefore, I assume that external attributions with regard to these external factors may be an important explanatory mechanism for employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes in a collectivist societal context such as China (e.g., Chao, Cheung, & Wu, 2011).

## **2.7 Future research avenues**

The review so far has discussed both contributions of, and gaps in, extant literature on HR perceptions in the Chinese context. In this section, I pinpoint several avenues for future research.

### **2.7.1 Measurement avenues**

Among the 25 empirical articles, only two adopted qualitative methods. The dearth of qualitative research is problematic in the sense that a qualitative approach can uncover complex and dynamic contexts in China and can tease out less visible processes through which a series of events occur (Yin, 2009). Therefore, I encourage future research to mobilise qualitative research methods to capture the “how” and “why” questions (Eisenhardt, 1989) and provide in-depth insights into the HRM environment in China.

Extant qualitative studies have employed in-depth interviews (e.g., Fu & Kamenou, 2011) to illuminate the mechanisms through which employees form perceptions of HR practices and through which the outcomes of their HR perceptions emerge. A wide variety of other qualitative methods, including focus groups, documentary analysis, participant observation, and a longitudinal case study approach, should be mobilised in future research. For example, the use of participant observation or ethnographic methods allows researchers to identify the complex and qualitatively distinct contexts (e.g., organisational background, business environmental features, national and cultural settings) and discern employees' subtle and invisible manners or behaviours in the workplace. This is particularly important in the Chinese context, where individuals prefer an indirect style of communication, and their attitudes may be subtly manifested in everyday

behaviours rather than explicit words. Indeed, there is a famous Chinese proverb: “actions speak louder than words (行胜于言).”

In addition, longitudinal case studies will be beneficial in providing insights into the social-historical embeddedness of employee perceptions of HR practices in China. Temporal variables (i.e., societal and political changes, digital transformation, industrial downsizing, and organisational reforms) represent important, if subtle, layers of contexts within which diverse aspects of organisational behaviours are framed (Johns, 2006). For example, the “9-9-6” working hour system (employees are required to work from 9 am to 9 pm per day and 6 days per week) is increasingly common in Chinese companies (Cooke et al., 2019). This intensive working hour system has recently drawn widespread condemnation as it severely violates Chinese Labour Law and international labour standards (see *People’s Daily* 2019). Thus, it would be interesting for researchers to engage in repeated observations of a particular organisational setting or settings to shed light on the changes in employees’ perceptions of HR practices on work schedule. Are there any changes in the “9-9-6” working hour system associated with employees’ perceptions of this excessive overtime working practice? If so, how do employees’ perceptions vary over time? What are the processes through which contextual conditions (e.g., government policies, public debate, and media coverage) have short- or long-range impacts on HR perceptions?

Moreover, given that past quantitative studies have directly borrowed a set of measurement items developed and validated in the western context, future research needs to identify the context-driven nature of HR perceptions measurement in China. An essential method is to establish novel measurement scales that have really captured Chinese recent socio-economic development. For example, as China entered a “new normal” phase of economic slowdown (Xiao & Cooke, 2019), will employees perceive that their organisation’s HR practices are adopted to respond to the external labour market conditions? As the Chinese government recently upgraded its ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’ campaign (Xiao & Cooke, 2019), will employees understand that their HR practices are implemented to stimulate technology innovation? Developing

measurements to address these questions can advance our knowledge of Chinese employees' perceptions of HR practices in the changing business context.

### **2.7.2 Theoretical avenues**

Extant theoretical frameworks guiding HR perceptions research in China are mainly micro-level (e.g., attribution theory, information processing theory, signalling and communication theory), and often devoid of organisational and institutional contexts. In this section, I suggest that future research should pay special attention to the micro-foundations of meso- and macro-level theoretical perspectives and seek to integrate different levels of analysis.

#### **2.7.2.1 Social network theory**

Social network theory, especially structural holes theory (Burt, 1992), may offer novel insights into contextualising HR perceptions, in that it emphasises the power imbalance among actors (e.g., leaders and employees) in the Chinese workplaces. A structural hole refers to an empty space in social networks when there is not a close interaction between two (groups of) actors (Burt, 1992). Structural holes theory posits that individuals with rich networks spanning the structural holes will broker the indirect relationships among all other actors (Burt, 1992). In this regard, they are able to exercise control over a wealth of information, opportunities, and resources that are not accessible to others (Snow & Fjeldstad, 2015).

Managers play the role of a broker in an organisation, as they are able to broker the indirect connection between employees across departments. That is, managers can access key information and knowledge of HR practices and exert their power to influence employees who have relatively limited information access. Therefore, it is to be expected that managers' perceptions of *agreement among principal HRM decision makers* (one of the meta-features of *consensus*) is likely to exert a powerful impact on employee perceptions of other HRM system strength features (e.g. *consistency* and *distinctiveness*). This is particularly important in the Chinese workplaces

where the power distance is relatively high: Chinese employees are likely to show strong deference and loyalty to their senior managers (Farh et al., 2007).

It would be fruitful to deploy the structural holes theory to examine the interconnections among features of HRM system strength. Why is *consensus* among decision makers (brokers) about HR practices a necessary precursor for improving *consistency* and *distinctiveness*? Building on the structural holes theory (Burt, 1992) and considering power distance in the Chinese workplace, I may postulate that consensus among key leaders and HR professionals allows for plenty of managers delivering similar messages about HR practices, which helps develop internally consistent implementation of practices across teams and units. The consistent implementation, in turn, helps make the HR practices visible, understandable, legitimate, and relevant across employees (distinctiveness). Findings based on structural holes theory can hence account for the intersections between power distance in the workplace (meso-level contexts) and employee HR perceptions (micro-level).

#### **2.7.2.2 Institutional logics theory**

Institutional logics theory is a popular theoretical paradigm in organisation studies that is yet to be mobilised in HR perception research in general. This is somewhat surprising, because institutional logics theory has power to delineate the interrelationships between institutional arrangements (e.g., HR practices) and individuals' schemes and behaviours (e.g., employee HR perceptions).

Institutional logics refer to “socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their daily activity” (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012, p. 51). Institutional logics theory consists of two mechanisms. The first is a top-down mechanism, predicting that institutional logics (e.g., market, profession, technology, and politics) will somewhat constrain individuals' choices for

sensemaking, the cognitive schemas they utilise to motive behaviours, and their interpretation of social systems (Thornton et al., 2012). The other mechanism is a bottom-up approach (also described as institutional work), assuming that individuals are able to actively utilise material resources and symbolic practices (e.g., narratives, sensemaking, and rhetorical devices) to transform the existing institutional practices and their associated institutional logics (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms offer theoretical insights into HR perceptions research in the Chinese context specifically. From a top-down perspective, institutional logics or environmental stimuli will provide building blocks for employees to generate a particular set of interpretations of HR practices. For instance, the Chinese government's recent policy initiative for transforming SOEs may have a significant impact on HR practices within SOEs and ultimately shape employees' HR perceptions. From a bottom-up perspective, when employees view their organisation's intention to implement certain HR practices (a specific form of institutional practices at the organisation level) as exploiting them, they may turn to trade unions and work collectively to challenge or even change these HR practices, or vote with their feet as an alternative. By contrast, when employees perceive that management adopts the HR practices in order to invest in employee well-being, they will make efforts to maintain these well-being-oriented HR practices.

### **2.7.3 Thematic research avenues**

A small number of previous studies have touched on contextual (institutional, organisational, and inter-personal) factors of HR perceptions. Institutional factors include Chinese cultural values (Fu & Kamenou, 2011) and social norms (Mcphail & McNulty, 2015); organisational factors consist of organisational backgrounds (Ma & Trigo, 2012) and implemented HR practices (Ali et al., 2019); interpersonal factors include supervisor-employee hukou status similarity (Li & Frenkel, 2017) and coworkers' HR perceptions (Jiang et al., 2017). In order to further

contextualise HR perceptions in China, I suggest that future research should pay more attention to the multi-level antecedents of HR perceptions.

### **2.7.3.1 HR perceptions across different employees**

Kelley (1973) developed a variance framework and proposed three potential causes of individuals' attributions: the characteristics of the person (person), the features of the entity (entity), and the particular situation where the attributions are made (time). In the domain of social and organisational psychology, subsequent research has revealed that the way in which individuals make causal inferences is based on their personal characteristics, including political and regional ideology (Whitehead, 2014), and previous job experience (Mitchell & Kalb, 1982). In the context of HRM, however, few studies have examined how individuals' characteristics bear on their perceptions of HR practices (Hewett et al., 2019). Indeed, organisational diversity literature shows that both surface-level diversity (e.g., gender, age, and race) and deep-level diversity (e.g., personality, cognitive schema, and cultural beliefs) can predict employees' organisational experiences (Joshi, Liao & Jackson, 2006).

Future research can build on attribution theory and workforce diversity literature to illuminate the variance of HR perceptions across employees within the same organisation or group. For example, in terms of demographic factors, will there be HR perception differences between different groups of employees across gender, age, education level, ethnicity, religion, hukou status?

In terms of innate factors, to what extent are employee perceptions of HR practices activated through their motivation, beliefs and psychological traits? For example, extraversion, as one of the big five personality traits (Goldberg, 1993), may be inextricably connected to employee HR perceptions. Extroverted employees have a high inclination to be actively engaged in social interactions and exchange work-related information with colleagues and supervisors (Chiang, Hsu, & Shih, 2015). Given their tendency to exchange information, I anticipate that extraverted employees are likely to be more familiar with organisational practices across units. Therefore, the

extent to which they agree that HR bundles (or a particular individual HR practice) exist within the organisation is larger than for introverted employees.

### **2.7.3.2 HR perceptions across different groups of employees**

While extant literature identified the variance of implemented HR practices across different employment groups (Wright & Boswell 2002), few empirical studies have investigated the extent to which HR practices are experienced or perceived differentially by employees in distinct groups.

Organisations tend to adopt differing HRM models to match the value and competency of particular employee groups (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Core and standard employees normally possess unique and valuable skills which are strategically important for the organisation, and therefore a commitment-based HRM model (Lepak & Snell, 2008) or a sophisticated HRM system (Melian-Gonzalez & Verano-Tacoronte, 2006) tends to be introduced to enhance core employees' loyalty to their organisation. On the contrary, peripheral and contingent employees whose knowledge is of limited strategic value to the organisation are likely to be managed by a short-term contract work arrangement (Lepak & Snell, 2008) or a less high-investment work systems (Lepak et al., 2007). In other words, there is by no means a single particular way to manage the entire workforce, and the between-group HRM differences can lead to complexity within employee perceptions of HR practices (Liao et al., 2009).

The establishment of psychological contracts, defined as a number of expectations that are exchanged between employees and employers, can be shaped by employee pre-employment beliefs, such as occupational norms and job-related schemas (Rousseau, 2001). Building on the psychological contract perspective (Rousseau, 2001), I anticipate that core and non-core, standard and contingent, professional and low-skilled workers, are likely to hold different organisational expectations. Future work can advance research in this arena by addressing the following questions: to what extent do core employees' HR perceptions differ from those of non-core employees? Can contingent employees' perceptions of HR practices influence standard

employees' HR perception, and vice versa? If so, what are the conditions under which the influence mechanisms are activated? How do the differences between contingent and standard employees' HR perceptions affect (contingent and standard) employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, and ultimately, their organisational performance?

### **2.7.3.3 HR perceptions across different contexts in China**

The important role of context has been generally acknowledged in HRM research (Cooke, 2018; Kim & Wright, 2011), but context is relatively under-appreciated in the HR perceptions literature (Wang et al., 2020). A small but growing body of literature has examined HR perceptions in non-western nations, China in particular, but most studies directly borrowed from the initial measurement scales developed in the western context, while downplaying the validity and reliability issues in China. In addition, previous literature has focused primarily on a particular single facet of the context — culture in most cases — while ruling out many other key and subtle aspects of context. Are there any other contextual factors beyond culture that could give rise to variation within employee perceptions of HR practices?

Context may be framed in multiple and qualitatively distinct ways (Shapiro, Von Glinow, & Xiao, 2007). A heavy reliance on cultural factors may run the risk of over-simplification and underplay other contextual differences that may be also relevant to HR perceptions. In this regard, a *polycontextual* method may be suitable for teasing out the various layers of national context in China. The key assumption of the polycontextual approach is that multitudes of national contexts pave the foundation for an individual's sense of knowing, which in turn has an impact on their perceptions of work and organisation, and ultimately on their attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007). I encourage future research to develop this line of reasoning by expanding beyond Chinese cultural contexts and, where appropriate, incorporating other relevant Chinese phenomena.



#### **2.7.3.4 Comparative studies of HR perceptions across different societal contexts**

Prior studies primarily rely on a single national context (e.g., China). Cross-national comparative study may be promising, as it enables us to test the generalisability of HR perceptions and develop a holistic understanding of between-nation variations of HR perception (Farndale & Sanders, 2017).

I suggest that future research should explain how national characteristics account for the variance of HR perceptions across nations. For instance, the different legislative systems may explain why HR perceptions vary across nations. In China, where participatory management is not legally required, the adoption of participatory management may be regarded by employees as the organisation's voluntary investment in employees, and they may therefore develop a positive perception of the organisation's HR practices. On the contrary, in a regulated labour market (e.g., The Netherlands) where participatory management practices are mandatory, the implementation of such practices may not activate employees' positive perceptions of the organisation's HR practices, because they tend to consider participatory management as the organisation's necessary response to regulatory pressures (Kim & Wright, 2011). Future research needs to build and test theories, using cross-national comparative studies, to clarify how and why employee HR perceptions vary across nations.

### **2.8 Conclusion**

Drawing on 25 China-based empirical studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals in English, this review study examines the extent to which employee perceptions of HRM have been contextualised in China. I argue, through the illustration of a context-oriented framework (Figure 2.1), that multi-level contextual factors matter within theoretical assumptions, measurement scales, empirical operationalisation, and antecedents in HR perceptions research, which extant literature might not have fully captured. I acknowledge that studies on employee perceptions of HRM in China are also published in Chinese journals. Therefore, future research

should include those Chinese articles to develop a more comprehensive understanding of contextualizing HRM perceptions in China. I also suggest that future studies should take into account diverse contexts by integrating a broader range of theories, going beyond standard interview methods, and further developing comprehensive measurement scales.

## **Chapter 3. Antecedent and employee well-being outcomes of perceived benefits schemes: A two-wave study**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the antecedent and employee well-being outcomes of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes (a particular form of HRM content). There is growing interest in employee-centred human resource management (HRM) (Guest, 2017), examining the relationship between employees' perceptions of HR practices and employee well-being. Employee well-being consists of three key dimensions: happiness, relationships, and health (Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). Most research has focused on happiness well-being, such as job satisfaction and commitment, whereas there has been only limited attention paid to health well-being (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Among the limited studies, there is not yet a consensus on whether perceived HRM promotes or hinders employee health well-being. Some studies revealed that perceived HR practices could mitigate health well-being issues (e.g. emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation), because HR practices provide employees with positive resources (Kilroy, Flood, Bosak, & Chênevert, 2016), while others found that HR perceptions could give rise to job demands and therefore result in health well-being problems (Conway, Fu, Monks, Alfes, & Bailey, 2016; Jensen, Patel, & Messersmith, 2013).

These mixed findings (whether perceived HRM promotes or hinders employee well-being) may at least in part reflect the potential complexity of HR practices and the distinct dimensions of HRM systems that are measured (Shantz, Arevshatian, Alfes, & Bailey, 2016). Following prior research that controls for the heterogeneity of HR practices (Sumelius, Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, & Smale, 2014), I embed my hypotheses in a specific single HR practice (statutory benefits schemes in China) rather than the whole bundle of HR practices. The Chinese statutory benefits schemes are a range of legally mandated programs (e.g. pension insurance, maternity insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, and housing funds) required by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. In this study, I define

perceived benefits schemes as the extent to which employees are satisfied with the fairness and quality of legally mandated benefits, which is a high evaluative construct (Beijer, Peccei, Veldhoven, & Paauwe, 2019). I chose employees' perceptions of statutory benefits schemes in the Chinese context for a number of reasons. First, Chinese statutory benefits schemes are designed to reduce employees' occupational risks and promote their quality of life (Lin, Trenberth, & Kelly, 2010), factors which are intimately linked to employee health well-being. Second, although the benefits scheme is becoming a crucial dimension of HRM and attracting ever-growing interest from practitioners, academic research on employee benefits remains sporadic and sparse (Dulebohn, Molloy, Pichler, & Murray, 2009). Third, statutory benefits are commonly provided in China, but the level and coverage of these benefits that employees receive may vary within and across firms (Lin et al., 2010). This study examines the variance in employees' perceptions of Chinese statutory benefits.

Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019) made a call for extending the theoretical underpinning of HRM-well-being research. One potentially fruitful way to make a contribution to theory development is to evaluate the core underlying mechanism that illuminates a certain relationship (Whetten, 1989). This study proposes a novel mediator, job involvement, which refers to the 'psychological identification with one's work' and 'the degree to which the job situation is central to the person and his (or her) identity' (Lawler & Hall, 1970, pp. 310–311). Recent research has identified the mediating role of work engagement, a construct similar to job involvement, in the relationship between HRM and employee outcomes (Guan & Frenkel, 2019); however, job involvement conceptually differs from work engagement because it focuses more on intrinsic factors (e.g. self-esteem and personal identity) (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). Through mobilising the conservation of resources (COR) framework (Hobfoll, 1989) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), I provide a richer theoretical evaluation of the indirect relationship between perceived benefits scheme, job involvement, and emotional exhaustion (an important component of health well-being).

Moreover, most literature on HR perceptions, as part of the field of employee-centred HRM research, has paid insufficient attention to the antecedents to HR perceptions (Hewett, Shantz, & Mundy, 2019). This is a considerable research gap, as a limited understanding of the antecedents may present challenges for employers as they try to manage employees' HR perceptions effectively and thereafter to promote employee well-being. Many psychological theorists suggest that the way in which individuals make attributions for the stimulus is based on the features of the stimulus, situational factors, and between-person variability in perceptions (e.g. motivations, demographic backgrounds, and cultural values) (Hewett, Shantz, Mundy, & Alfes, 2018). This study investigates whether perceived benefits schemes are shaped by employees' Chinese traditionality, which is defined as an individual cultural trait that reveals the extent to which individuals subscribe to the traditional beliefs and values rooted in Chinese society (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997).

Overall, this study established a conceptual model to examine both the antecedents and well-being outcomes of employees' perceptions of statutory benefits schemes. In doing so, this study makes three main contributions to the existing knowledge. First, it heeds Guest's (2017) call to give greater priority to promoting employee well-being in the HRM domain. My study is novel insofar as it examines the relationship between benefits schemes and health well-being (or emotional exhaustion). This is timely given the generally increasing level of job-related stress at workplaces (Cooper, Wang, Bartram, & Cooke, 2019) and the intent of benefits schemes to sustain employee well-being. Second, this study is innovative because it extends the theoretical underpinning of benefits schemes, namely the COR framework and social exchange theory, to explore the novel underlying mechanism (job involvement) that links benefits schemes to emotional exhaustion. I do this by utilising two-wave data collected in manufacturing companies in China, where material benefits play an important role in HRM. Third, I offer insights into the nomothetic net of HR perceptions by testing a hypothesis that includes Chinese traditionality as an antecedent. This is important, considering that extant research focuses solely on the outcomes

of HR perceptions (Hewett et al., 2019) and that a comprehensive understanding of antecedents can help employers to better manage employees' perceptions of HR practices and improve employee well-being.

### **3.2 Theoretical background and hypotheses**

#### **3.2.1 Perceived HRM and employee well-being**

With the development of employee-centred HRM research, a burgeoning body of literature not only investigates employees' perceptions of HRM in general (Nishii et al., 2008), but also brings employee well-being to the centre stage (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Associated with these trends is a wider debate as to whether perceived HR practices promote or hinder employee well-being. Employee well-being consists of three key dimensions: happiness, relationships, and health (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Most research has focused on happiness well-being, such as job satisfaction and commitment, whereas there has been only limited attention paid to health well-being (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Among the limited studies, there is not yet a consensus on whether perceived HRM promotes or hinders employee health well-being.

Some studies adopted an optimistic perspective, showing that employees' perceptions of HR practices can reduce health issues and improve employee well-being (Kilroy, Flood, Bosak, & Chênevert, 2017; Nishii et al., 2008). The theoretical framework underlying their argument is social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), emphasising the tangible and intangible effects. On the tangible side, for instance, the perceptions of a bundle of HR practices are associated with the availability of supportive benefits and material resources (Kilroy et al., 2016). On the intangible side, perceived HR practices deliver a symbolic message to employees that their organisation is committed to making investments in employees' welfare and benefits (Nishii et al., 2008). As such, employees are expected to respond to their organisation's favour by showing positive behaviours at the workplace and by improvement in their job-related well-being (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019).

However, some literature reveals that HRM perceptions could generate health problems and hinder employee well-being (e.g. Conway et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2013). The premise these studies build on is mainly labour process theory (Thompson & Newsome, 2004). Specifically, HR practices are perceived as managerial apparatuses for monitoring employees, reducing labour costs and improving profitability. The signals that HR practices send are conceived as exploiting rather than benefiting employees (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). In this regard, perceived HR practices are likely to intensify employees' workloads, which may increase potential risks to employee well-being and give rise to emotional exhaustion (Kroon, Van De Voorde, & Van Veldhoven, 2009).

These contrasting findings may not only be rooted in different theoretical underpinnings, but also reflect the potential complexity of HR practices and the different facets of HRM systems that are measured (Shantz et al., 2016). Even the same incarnation of HRM (e.g. high-performance work systems and high-involvement work systems) was measured by different items. In fact, different components of HR practices may have dissimilar, or, for that matter, counteracting effects on health well-being. Oppenauer and Van De Voorde's (2018) study has shown that three dimensions of high-involvement work systems (practices related to ability, motivation, and work design) are positively associated with job responsibility, which in turn mitigates emotional exhaustion. But the motivation dimension of high-involvement work systems is positively related to work overload, which will lead to a higher level of emotional exhaustion. As such, Boxall, Guthrie and Paauwe (2016) suggested that future research should address the extent to which employee well-being derived from one component of an HRM system may be counteracted by employee exploitation that is generated by other HR component(s).

Following prior research that controls for the heterogeneity of HR practices (e.g. Sumerlius, Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, & Smale, 2014), I embed my hypotheses in employees' perceptions of a specific single component of HR practice (statutory benefits schemes) rather than the whole bundle of HR practices. The Chinese statutory benefits schemes are legally mandated

programs required by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, including pension insurance, maternity insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, and housing funds (Lin et al., 2010). Perceived benefits scheme refers to the extent to which employees are satisfied with the fairness and quality of their benefits schemes, which is a high evaluative construct (Beijer et al., 2019)

I choose the statutory benefits schemes as the focus for a number of reasons. First, statutory benefits schemes can promote organisational support and provide employees with a positive workplace environment, both of which are likely to enhance employee well-being. However, employee benefits have not been explicitly discussed in previous studies. Second, statutory benefits schemes are widespread among firms in China and significantly intertwined with employees' everyday life. Nevertheless, the level and coverage of statutory benefits that employees receive may vary within and across organisations (Lin et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important to explore the variance in employees' perceptions of statutory benefits in China.

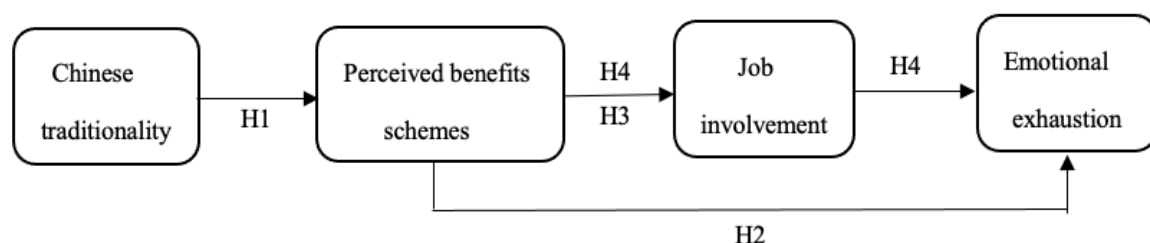
Employee well-being consists of three key dimensions: happiness, relationships, and health (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Most research has focused on happiness well-being, such as job satisfaction and commitment, whereas there has been only limited attention paid to health well-being (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Among the limited studies, there is not yet a consensus on whether perceived HRM improves or damages employee health well-being. In the present study, I leverage the COR framework (Hobfoll, 1989) to interpret the influence of the perceived benefits scheme on emotional exhaustion (an important component of health well-being). When an employing organisation provides employees with monetary and non-monetary benefits, employees tend to be more involved in their job and be more committed to their organisation as a reciprocal exchange (Casper & Harris, 2008). Based on the COR framework, employees are less likely to experience health issues (e.g. stress and burnout) when they are capable of achieving, protecting, and building objective or energy resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Energy resources at work could be characterised as positive psychological states, such as job involvement and work



engagement (Shantz et al., 2016). I therefore posit that benefits schemes can motivate employees to be involved in their job as well as to experience a lower level of emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, this study responds to a recent call for exploring the antecedents of HR perceptions (Hewett et al., 2019). Early attributional theorists have suggested that the perceptions individuals make of the event or the behaviour are determined by the features of the stimulus, situational or external factors (the context of the stimulus), and between-person variability in perceptions (e.g., motivations, ability, demographic backgrounds, past experience and cultural values) (Hewett et al., 2018). In this research, I focus on Chinese traditionality as an individual-level antecedent of perceived benefits schemes, because it is an important cultural value that affects employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in the workplace (He, Long, & Kuvaas, 2016) and is significantly linked with my study context, China.

Figure 3.1 depicts the relationships between Chinese traditionality (antecedent), perceived benefits schemes, job involvement (mediator), and emotional exhaustion. The subsequent sections explicate my key theoretical background and hypotheses concerning these relationships.



**Figure 3.1 A conceptual model of perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion**

### 3.2.2 Association between Chinese traditionality and perceived benefits schemes

Previous work has made a call for the identification of the personal values that shape employees' perceptions of HR practices (Hewett et al., 2018). In this study, I test whether Chinese traditionality acts as an antecedent of perceived benefits schemes. As an individual-level construct, Chinese traditionality is defined as “the degree to which individuals endorse traditional Chinese values” (Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004, p. 234). A key aspect of Chinese traditionality is respect

for authority, originating from the five oblique facets of Chinese Confucian ideology (Yang, Yu, & Yeh, 1989). Farh, Earley and Lin (1997) were among the first to introduce the terminology of Chinese traditionality to the organisational behaviour domain by concentrating merely on the aspect of respect for authority. In their study, traditionality was measured and theorised as the hierarchical orientation in the five cardinal relations (e.g. emperor-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger, and friend-friend). These relationships prescribe individuals' social roles and their associated obligations and responsibilities. Since then, the accumulating empirical literature has adopted this measurement and conceptualisation of Chinese traditionality and focused solely on the respect for authority dimension (He et al., 2016).

It is well documented that traditionality affects employees' attitudinal and behavioural responses to their working environment (He et al., 2016)<sup>3</sup>. Farh, Hackett and Liang (2007) suggested that high-traditionality employees are more inclined than low-traditionality ones to base their attitudes and behaviour on their perceived role obligations, rather than the way in which they are treated by the authority. In the context of an organisation, employees high in traditionality have the tendency to show loyalty and obedience to their employers and leaders, and are more willing to comply with their organisational practices or policies (Yang et al., 1989). Employees high in traditionality are therefore less sensitive to inequality in employment relations, and more tolerant of the power differentials in the workplace (Farh et al., 1997). In other words, traditionalists seldom challenge the legitimacy of organisational practices and have low expectations of organisational fairness (Wang, Hackett, Cui, & Zhang, 2012). Because they are inclined to obey authority and conform to the status quo (He et al., 2016), high-traditionality employees are unwilling to question the inequity of benefits schemes and are prone to consider

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<sup>3</sup> Considering that some studies revealed that Chinese traditionality could moderate the relationship between organisational practices and employee outcomes (Farh, Hackett and Liang, 2007; Hui, Lee and Rousseau, 2004), I adopted PROCESS (Model 8) for SPSS to check whether Chinese traditionality is a moderator. The results illuminated that Chinese traditionality did not exert a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion.

unfair treatment as an acceptable and normal phenomenon. For that reason, high-traditionality employees are more likely to view the benefits schemes as fair and of high quality.

Conversely, low-traditionality employees are less likely to accept unfair treatment or conform to their leaders' directives. Wang et al. (2012) revealed that employees low in traditionality are likely to exhibit more sensitivity to procedural fairness, since they tend to be more egalitarian and sceptical. Consistent with this line of reasoning, I argue that low-traditionality employees will be more critical of benefit inequity and regard the benefits schemes as unfair and low in quality. In view of the above, I propose that:

H1: Chinese traditionality is positively related to employees' perceptions of benefits schemes.

### **3.2.3 Perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion**

There has been much debate regarding the HRM–well-being outcomes relationship (Guest, 2017). In this study, I identified emotional exhaustion, defined as a general reaction to job strain, as a specific form of health well-being issue (Oppenauer & Van De Voorde, 2018).

The COR framework is an influential theoretical framework used in previous studies to explain how HR practices affect employee well-being. The framework's core proposition is that individuals actively seek to build, protect and retain their objective (e.g. money) and psychological (i.e. organisational support) resources. Both perceived and actual loss of these resources are likely to elicit differing forms of distress (e.g., emotional exhaustion). In contrast, the accumulation of resources can be expected to be sufficient to satisfy individuals' needs, and thereby reduce the degree of stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Shantz et al., 2016).

Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) argued that one crucial means of attenuating burnout is through suitable HR practices which are valued by employees. Indeed, previous studies revealed that supportive HR practices are negatively associated with job strain or burnout (Frenkel, Li, & Restubog, 2012). A statutory benefits scheme is an important dimension of HRM systems, providing employees with a series of tangible and intangible resources (e.g. insurances and

housing funding) to enable employees (and sometimes their families) to improve their quality of life (Teti & Andriotto, 2013). In effect, the benefits scheme can be regarded by employees as an *objective* resource due to its physical nature, that is, the provision of funding and money (Lin et al., 2010). Employees are envisaged to depend on objective benefit resources to cope with potential or actual stressful circumstances (Williams & MacDermid, 1994). For example, employees may make use of medical insurance and work-related injury insurance to reduce occupational risk (Teti & Andriotto, 2013), utilise the pension insurance to prevent the potential anxiety or uncertainty caused by retirement (Dulebohn et al., 2009), and deploy the housing funding to improve their socioeconomic status, which has been found to counter depression (Dohrenwend, 1978). Moreover, the benefits schemes can be perceived by employees as *psychological* resources in the sense that they represent organisational support, which promotes a positive sense of belonging and enables them to be committed to their organisation (Galanaki, 2019). The accumulation of *psychological* resources is able to counteract job-related stress, somatisation disorders, and psychological exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). Consequently, employees will become more energetic and determined at work (Williams & MacDermid, 1994). In other words, employees' perceptions of benefits schemes could mitigate emotional exhaustion. Therefore, I propose the following:

*H2.* Employees' perceptions of benefits schemes are negatively related to emotional exhaustion.

### **3.2.4 Perceived benefits schemes and job involvement**

The construct of job involvement signifies individuals' psychological identification with their job, involving both attitudinal and behavioural dimensions (Lawler & Hall, 1970). Employees are liable to show a high level of identification with their work, and be prepared to devote a variety of resources, efforts, and energies to their organisation when ample managerial support and organisational investment are in place (Diefendorff, Brown, Kamin, & Lord, 2002).

Based on social exchange theory (in addition to COR framework), an employee benefits scheme can be considered a key form of organisational support, which is likely to encourage employees' involvement, due to a reciprocal exchange (Molm, Peterson, & Takahashi, 1999). Specifically, the benefits scheme introduced by the organisation delivers a message to employees that their organisation is willing to take care of their well-being, invest in and support their development, and enhance their life quality (Teti & Andriotto, 2013). In turn, employees feel an obligation to respond to the organisation's appreciation by taking initiatives at work and showing identification and enthusiasm with their job (Nishii et al., 2008).

Empirical research on the reciprocal exchange has shown that employees' perceptions of organisational support and recognition may lead to a high level of job involvement (Diefendorff et al., 2002). In particular, when economic or socio-emotional benefits are available, employees will develop a strong psychological connection with their employer (Malhotra, Budhwar, & Prowse, 2007), show high levels of satisfaction with their job (Linz & Semykina, 2012), and experience emotional commitment to their organisation (Newman & Sheikh, 2012). These positive attitudes are related to employees' psychological identification with their job, which is theorised as job involvement (Lawler & Hall, 1970).

To recap, I argue that employees' perceptions of benefits schemes, epitomised as a specific form of organisational support (Williams & MacDermid, 1994), are associated with employees' job involvement levels. Therefore, I propose the following:

*H3. Employees' perceptions of benefits schemes are positively related to job involvement.*

### **3.2.5 Mediating effect of job involvement**

A number of premises have been put forward to elucidate how perceived benefits schemes affect well-being. Nevertheless, the core underlying mechanisms of this relationship are under-theorised (Dulebohn et al., 2009).

The COR framework states that individuals tend to experience a lower level of stress and burnout when supportive resources are available. Such resources can be objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies which are appreciated by people (Hobfoll, 1989). Different from other theoretical underpinnings concerned with a specific resource, COR theory assumes that different forms of resources in no way operate individually. Rather, these resources are likely to be interrelated, travelling in packs or caravans (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). That is, when employees are provided with sufficient *objective resources* (e.g. HR strategies), they are inclined to obtain associated *energy resources*, which may be characterised as positive work-related attitudes (e.g. job involvement) to improve their well-being (Malik & Garg, 2020). This indicates that the relationship between HR practices (*objective resources*) and employee well-being can be indirect, as it activates *energy resources*, such as job involvement, to tone down the influences of stressful working environments (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). This supposition is consistent with Shantz et al.'s (2016) finding that job involvement mediates the association between HRM performance attributions and exhaustion.

I therefore anticipate that the impacts of perceived benefits schemes on employees' stress (i.e. emotional exhaustion) can occur via job involvement. Specifically, the support and resources an employee benefits scheme provides lead to employees' identification with their organisation (Dulebohn et al., 2009). As job involvement covers an employee's psychological identification, motivating employees to be more involved at work can be considered one of the objects of a benefits scheme. Although previous studies revealed that HR strategies will heighten stress and anxiety, as they put intensive demands on employees (Jensen et al., 2013), I argue that involved employees are likely to mitigate stress and overcome job-related obstacles (Brown, 1996), in that they are capable of devoting sustained energies and efforts to work (Brown & Leigh, 1996). Based on the COR framework, vigour, dedication, and absorption can be regarded as *energy resources* which employees tend to use to accomplish their work goals (Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1995), and develop a caring and enthusiastic attitude toward their organisation (Paoline & Lambert,

2011), which will in turn enhance their health well-being. Considering the fact that the resource potential of benefits schemes will directly mitigate emotional exhaustion in their own right, I expect that job involvement will partially, rather than fully, mediate this association. Taken together, I predict that:

*H4: Job involvement will partially mediate the relationship between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion.*

### **3.3 Methods**

#### **3.3.1 Sample and procedures**

I collected data using both paper-based and web-based questionnaires in eight large-sized manufacturing companies, including four state-owned enterprises and four privately-owned enterprises. The locations of these companies were in three places in China: Beijing (one firm), Suzhou (six firms), and Daqing (one firm). I studied companies in diverse regions in order to contribute to existing HRM literature in China that focuses primarily on the developed coastal areas (Cooper et al., 2019). I selected the manufacturing industry because: it is an important segment of the Chinese economy and global production (Guan & Frenkel, 2019); workers are relatively less well educated and the average wage of the industry is much lower than that of most other sectors; it also has a higher level of labour rights violation and labour disputes (see National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). Benefit provision is therefore a valuable HR practice to employees. I gained access to these companies through personal networks. The purpose of the survey study was explained to the managers, and they helped me distribute and collect the two-wave questionnaires between May 2019 to January 2020. Asking managers to administer questionnaires is not unusual in the HRM field (e.g., Katou, Budhwar, & Patel, 2014), especially when the information collected is deemed not sensitive to the management or company. The Chinese social relationship is one that is based on particularistic *guanxi* (Frenkel et al., 2012). Response rate tends to be low when employees are requested to fill in a survey by a stranger (the

researcher). By contrast, they are more likely to respond when asked by someone whom they know. In order to ensure that this data collection method would not induce participants' positive feedback, my survey did not include questions that evaluated participants' perceptions of managerial behaviours. Given that participants' negative views were common in the surveys, I am confident that the response bias is not a serious concern.

All the survey questions were originally written in English and then a language expert fluent in both English and Chinese translated and back translated (Brislin, 1970). Before administering the formal surveys, I asked four participants to complete a pilot survey and provide their informal feedback. After their feedback, I amended and finalised the questions to ensure their reliability, clarity and proper sequence.

The first-wave questionnaire asked participants to provide their demographic details and rate their perceived benefits schemes, job involvement, and Chinese traditionality. All participants were informed that their identities were confidential and those participating were eligible to receive a gift from the researchers. Providing participants with a chance to receive a gift can incentivise them to complete the questionnaire in an objective way, which has been widely used in survey studies (see for example, Frenkel et al., 2012). In the six companies in Suzhou, paper-based questionnaires were hand-delivered randomly to participants. Each participant was asked to complete the questionnaire after work. After two weeks, 251 participants completed the paper-based questionnaires. In the company in Daqing and the company in Beijing, web-based questionnaires were distributed to participants through Wechat (one of the most popular social media platforms in China) over a period of two weeks. One hundred and eighty web-based questionnaires were returned. Because snowball sampling was adopted via Wechat, the response rate for the first wave survey cannot be reported. In total, 431 questionnaires were completed in the first wave.

One month later, the second-wave questionnaire (either paper-based or web-based) asked participants to evaluate their degree of emotional exhaustion. Each participant was given a



specific code number, which was used to match participants' second-wave results with their first-wave responses. Two-wave surveys can help reduce CMV (Podsakoff, McKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

After excluding surveys with missing information, I received 281 matched and valid responses. The final response rate was 65.2 percent. Of the 281 participants, 171 (60.9 percent) were male and 157 (55.9 percent) were aged between 25 and 35. 35.6 percent of participants had worked in the company for less than three years and 40.9 percent had a bachelor degree as their highest qualification.

### 3.3.2 Measures

Except for control variables, all the survey items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Chinese traditionality.* Chinese traditionality was measured using the four-item short scale of submission to authority (Farth et al., 1997). This reduced scale was adapted from the Chinese Individual Traditionality Scale (Yang et al., 1989)<sup>4</sup>. Sample items included: "The best way to avoid mistakes is to follow the instructions of senior persons." The Cronbach alpha of this scale was .65, which was consistent with those (ranging from .60 to .76) in past literature (He et al., 2016).

*Perceived benefits scheme.* To measure the perceived benefits schemes, six items (pension insurance, maternity insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, and housing fund) were selected, building on Lin et al.'s (2010) work on mandatory benefits in China. These items evaluate the extent to which respondents perceive that benefit

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<sup>4</sup> Although the item "Children should respect those people who are respected by their parents." has been successfully adopted in prior studies to measure the traditional values of the Chinese society (Hui et al., 2004), I deleted this item because of its weak factor loading.

practices are fair and of high quality. A sample item was: “In our organisation, the unemployment insurance is fair and of high quality.” Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was 0.91.

*Job involvement.* I used a six-item version (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Sjöberg & Sverke, 2000) of Kanungo’s (1982) Job Involvement Questionnaire (JIQ). Sample items included: “Most of my personal life goals are job-oriented.” The measure yielded a Cronbach alpha of .89.

*Emotional exhaustion.* Employees were asked to assess the extent to which they felt emotionally exhausted using Kilroy et al.’s (2017) five-item scale. The scale was initially developed by Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1997), which has been proven to be suitable for various kinds of jobs and industries. A sample item was “I feel burned out from my work.” The Cronbach alpha of this scale was .92.

*Control variables.* In line with previous research (Shantz et al., 2016), age, gender, organisational tenure and educational background were included in the proposed relationships as control variables to rule out their potential influences on emotional exhaustion.

### **3.3.3 Analytical strategy**

I deployed structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 22.0 to assess my hypothesised model. SEM is considered a powerful multivariate data analysis technique, as it can simultaneously test a hypothesised model with both direct and indirect paths, provide the overall model fit, and minimise the biasing effects of measurement errors (Hair et al., 2014). According to Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) two-step procedure, I first adopted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to specify and assess my measurement model. In line with previous studies (Kilroy et al., 2016), a number of fit indices were reported to evaluate model adequacy, including  $\chi^2$  goodness-of-fit test, the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

In the second step, structural models were established and tested. In order to explore the mediation effect, I compared the fit indices of a full mediation model with a partial mediation

model. The bootstrapping method was employed to examine the indirect effect. I utilised bootstrapping with 95% confidence interval (CI) and 5,000 boot samples.

### **3.4 Results**

Table 3.1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, data normality metrics, and correlations among all variables used in this study. The mode age is 2 (25-35 years old). The mode gender is 1 (male). The mode education is 5 (bachelor). The mode tenure is 1 (below 3 years). Correlations among focal variables were in the hypothesised direction. Considering that demographic variables were not significantly associated with the dependent variable (emotional exhaustion) in my model, I omitted them with the purpose of avoiding misinterpretation of my results (Kilroy et al., 2017). In order to identify the role of organisational context in shaping employees' perceptions of benefits schemes, I also examined the correlations between organisational variables (organisational location and ownership) and perceived benefits schemes. The results indicated that organisational location was significantly related to perceived benefits schemes, while organisational ownership did not have a significant impact on perceived benefits schemes.

**Table 3.1 Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations**

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	2.30	.86	NA							
2. Gender	1.39	.49	-.05	NA						
3. Education	4.09	1.01	-.38**	.06	NA					
4. Tenure	2.19	1.08	.55**	-.03	-.23**	NA				
5. Perceived benefits schemes	3.41	.85	.02	-.07	-.02	.05	<b>.81</b>			
6. Job involvement	3.28	.87	.05	-.01	-.09	.02	.51**	<b>.75</b>		
7. Chinese traditionality	3.00	.80	.18**	-.07	-.20**	.09	.22**	.36**	<b>.77</b>	
8. Emotional exhaustion	2.59	.95	-.02	-.07	.10	-.00	-.56**	-.43**	-.16**	<b>.82</b>
9. Cronbach alphas	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	.91	.89	.65	.92
10. Composite reliabilities (CR)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	.92	.88	.72	.91
11. Skewness	NA	NA	.79	.45	-.41	.34	-.03	-.32	-.01	.22
12. Kurtosis	NA	NA	.58	-1.81	-.72	-1.01	-.69	-.30	-.22	-.63

*Note:* N = 281, \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Age: 1= below 25, 2= 25-35, 3= 36-45, 4= 46-55, 5= 56-60; Gender: 1= male, 2= female; Education: 1= primary school, 2= secondary school, 3= technical secondary school or high school, 4= three-year college, 5= bachelor, 6= master and above; Tenure: 1= below three years, 2= three to five years, 3= five to ten years, 4= above ten years. Square roots of AVE are **boldfaced** along the diagonal.

### 3.4.1 Measurement model

I conducted CFA with maximum likelihood estimation of the measures of Chinese traditionality, perceived benefits schemes, job involvement, and emotional exhaustion. The results showed that the hypothesised four-factor model was a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 / df = 1.913$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; IFI = 0.955; TLI = 0.947; RMSEA = 0.057; CFI = 0.954). In addition, my hypothesised four-factor model was better than other parsimonious models (see Table 3.2). For instance, a three-factor model combining perceived benefits schemes and job involvement into one factor yielded a poorer fit to my data ( $\chi^2 / df = 4.399$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; IFI = 0.829; TLI = 0.804; RMSEA = 0.110; CFI = 0.828), as did a three-factor model combining job involvement and emotional exhaustion into one factor ( $\chi^2 / df = 4.628$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; IFI = 0.817; TLI = 0.791; RMSEA = 0.114; CFI = 0.816).

Following Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) recommendation to test for common method bias (CMB), I utilized Harman's single-factor test, which is widely used in HRM research (see for example, García-Carbonell, Martín-Alcázar, & Sanchez-Gardey, 2018; Malik & Lenka, 2019). All the items included in this study (Chinese traditionality, perceived benefit schemes, job involvement, and emotional exhaustion) were loaded onto an exploratory factor analysis. The results revealed that a single factor explained 39% of the total variance, which is below the threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As shown in Table 3.2, this one-factor model exhibited a very poor fit ( $\chi^2 / df = 7.755$ , CFI = 0.652, IFI = 0.654, TLI = 0.611, RMSEA = 0.155). Hence, I conclude that CMB could not be a serious concern in this study.

**Table 3.2 Confirmatory factor analysis of measurement models: Fit indices**

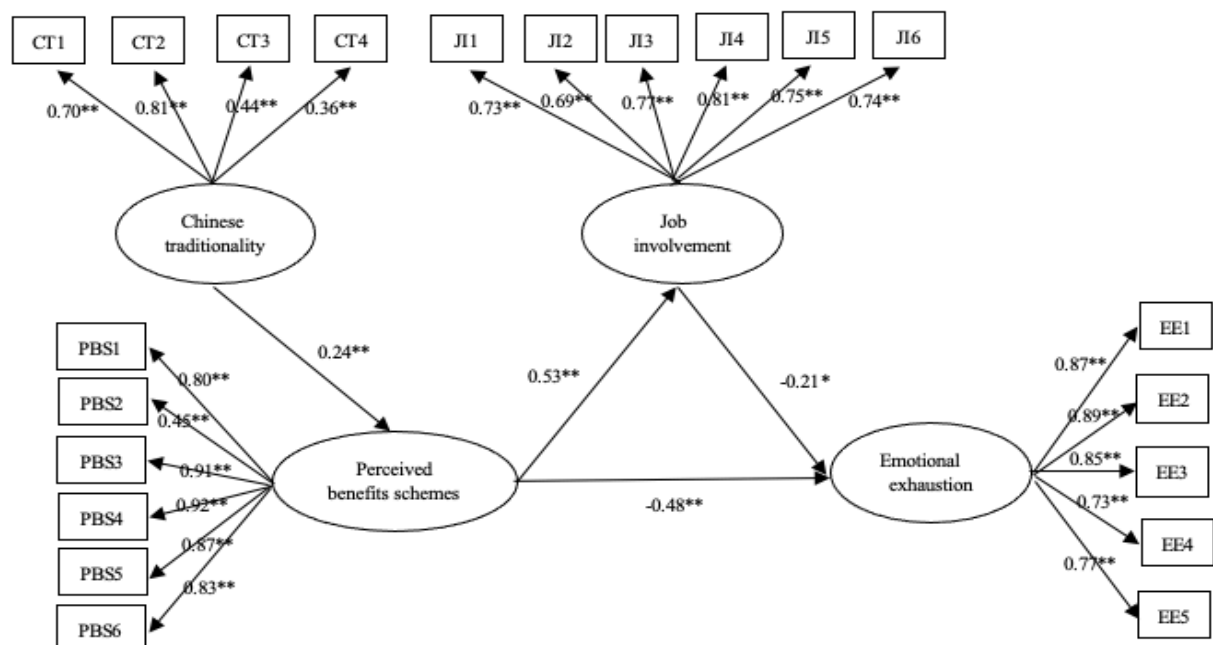
Models	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\chi^2 / df$	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Hypothesised four-factor model	348.20 (182)	1.913	0.954	0.955	0.947	0.057
Three-factor model: CT, EE, PBS + JI	813.76 (185)	4.399	0.828	0.829	0.804	0.110
Three-factor model: CT, PBS, JI + EE	856.19 (185)	4.628	0.816	0.817	0.791	0.114
Two-factor model: CT + PBS, JI + EE	1006.39(187)	5.382	0.775	0.777	0.748	0.125
One-factor model: CT + PBS + JI + EE	1457.98(188)	7.755	0.652	0.654	0.611	0.155

Notes: N = 281. CT = Chinese traditionality; PBS = perceived benefits scheme; JI = job involvement; EE = emotional exhaustion

In order to ensure the convergent and discriminant validity of my measures, I assessed composite reliability (CR), square roots of average variance extracted (AVE), and inter-construct correlations (Katou et al., 2014). As indicated in Table 3.1, the CR values of all the latent variables (Chinese traditionality, perceived benefits schemes, job involvement, and emotional exhaustion) are higher than 0.7; the AVE values of all the variables are higher than 0.5; and the square root of each variable's AVE is greater than its correlations with other variables. Overall, the results can support the discriminant and convergent validity of measures in the present study (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

### 3.4.2 Structural model

Figure 3.2 presents my structural model. Table 3.3 reports the factor loadings for the CFA. H1 predicted that Chinese traditionality would be positively related to employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. The results indicated that there was a significant positive relationship ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Hence, H1 is supported.



**Figure 3. 2 Standardised structural equation modelling results**

Note: PBS (1-6), perceived benefits schemes (1-6); CT (1-4), Chinese traditionality (1-4); JI (1-6), job involvement (1-6); EE (1-5), emotional exhaustion (1-5). \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table 3.3 Factor loadings for the CFA**

	Factor loadings		Factor loadings
CT1 $\leftarrow$ CT	0.702	JI1 $\leftarrow$ JI	0.728
CT2 $\leftarrow$ CT	0.789	JI2 $\leftarrow$ JI	0.687
CT3 $\leftarrow$ CT	0.460	JI3 $\leftarrow$ JI	0.769
CT4 $\leftarrow$ CT	0.360	JI4 $\leftarrow$ JI	0.808
PBS1 $\leftarrow$ PBS	0.800	JI5 $\leftarrow$ JI	0.755
PBS2 $\leftarrow$ PBS	0.453	JI6 $\leftarrow$ JI	0.740
PBS3 $\leftarrow$ PBS	0.914	EE1 $\leftarrow$ EE	0.866
PBS4 $\leftarrow$ PBS	0.918	EE2 $\leftarrow$ EE	0.888
PBS5 $\leftarrow$ PBS	0.873	EE3 $\leftarrow$ EE	0.850
PBS6 $\leftarrow$ PBS	0.833	EE4 $\leftarrow$ EE	0.734
		EE5 $\leftarrow$ EE	0.766

Note: PBS (1-6), perceived benefits schemes (1-6); CT (1-4), Chinese traditionality (1-4);

JI (1-6), job involvement (1-6); EE (1-5), emotional exhaustion (1-5).

H2 stated that employees' perceptions of benefits schemes are negatively related to emotional exhaustion. I found a significant negative relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = -0.48$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), thus supporting H2.

H3 proposed that the effect of perceived benefits schemes on job involvement is positive and significant. The results showed that perceived benefits schemes were a significant predictor of job involvement ( $\gamma = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). H3 is therefore supported.

H4 focuses on the mediating mechanism between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion. I followed the procedures proposed by Frenkel et al. (2012) for examining the mediation models by means of SEM. The first step was to compare a full mediation model and a partial mediation model. The full mediation model only specified an indirect effect of perceived benefits schemes on emotional exhaustion through job involvement. In the partial mediation model, there is a direct relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion as well as an indirect relationship via job involvement.

As Table 3.3 indicates, the partial mediation model exhibited a better fit for the data than the full mediation model ( $\Delta\chi^2$  (df) = 50.272(1),  $p < 0.05$ ). In this regard, I retained the partial mediation model.

**Table 3.4 Structural equation model comparisons**

Models	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\chi^2$ /df	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Partial mediation model	366.584(184)	1.992	0.950	0.950	0.943	0.060
Full mediation model	416.856(185)	2.253	0.936	0.937	0.928	0.067

*Note:* N = 281.

A bootstrapping analysis (5,000 bootstraps) further revealed that there was a partial mediation effect for emotional exhaustion. Specifically, the standardised indirect effect of perceived benefits schemes on emotional exhaustion through job involvement was significantly negative (-0.11, 95% CI = [-0.197, -0.038]) and the direct effect was also significantly negative (-0.48, 95% CI = [-0.619, -0.335]). As zero was excluded in the 95 percent confidence intervals, I conclude that job involvement partially mediated the relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion. To sum up, these results, viewed together, provided the support for H4. It is important to note that the partial mediation could reflect some omitted mediators other than job involvement, which should be examined in future research (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010).

### 3.5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine both the antecedent and employee well-being outcomes of perceived benefits schemes. An interesting finding in this study is that Chinese traditionality positively affects employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. I also revealed that perceived benefits schemes reduce employees' emotional exhaustion by encouraging employees' job involvement. The COR framework and social exchange theory were utilised to explain the dynamics of these associations. My study has several implications for HR perceptions and well-being research and practice.



### **3.5.1 Theoretical implications**

This study makes four contributions. The first contribution is to detect an antecedent of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. Employee perceptions of HR practices have attracted significant interest from HR researchers in recent decades (Kilroy et al., 2016). It is argued that the explanation of the relationship between HR perceptions and outcomes has been emphasised at the expense of attention to antecedents of HR perceptions (Hewett et al., 2019). Scholars in the HRM field have suggested that research on HR perceptions would benefit from building and testing the framework of HR antecedents (Hewett et al., 2018). My study revealed that the individual-level factor (Chinese traditionality) positively affected perceived benefits schemes. Employees high in traditionality normally have a higher unfairness threshold and are more likely to show submission to the unequal distribution of benefits (He et al., 2016). As such, traditionalists are inclined to perceive benefits schemes at a higher level than their counterparts do. This finding can echo prior literature, suggesting that there is between-person heterogeneity for the effectiveness of employee benefits schemes (Dencker, Joshi, & Martocchio, 2007). Furthermore, my research findings lend support to Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) proposition that employees' perceptions of HR practices vary as a function of individual differences, such as personal disposition, cultural values, and cognitive schemas. Given that my study only focuses on the psychological factor, it would be valuable for future research to examine whether demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, and educational background) can shape employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. In addition, I encourage future research to pay attention to the external organisational context (e.g., institutional environment, political support, and national culture) to cast light on contextual attributions of HR perceptions.

Second, this research extends the literature on benefits by identifying the novel mediating processes between perceived benefits schemes and employee health well-being. The statutory benefits consist of a range of legally prescribed social insurance benefits, which are widely provided by organisations to their employees (Dulebohn et al., 2009). Despite their relevance to

employees and employers, statutory benefits are largely neglected in prior research. Moreover, the mediating mechanisms through which benefits schemes effect employee outcomes remain unclear. Examining the role of mediator(s) is theoretically important. As Whetten (1989) indicated, one promising way to make a contribution to theory development is to evaluate the core underlying mechanism that illuminates a certain relationship. Proposing a novel mediator, namely, job involvement, allows for a richer theoretical assessment of how perceived benefits schemes give rise to employee well-being. By mobilising the COR theories (Hobfoll, 1989), I argue that the indirect relationship between perceived benefits schemes and employee well-being operates through job involvement.

Third, this study responds to Guest's (2017) call to bring employee well-being to the centre stage of HRM research. The neglect of employee well-being in HRM research is problematic, because cases of employees' burnout in the workplace are increasing (Shantz et al., 2016). In addition, benefits schemes are implemented to protect and improve employees' physical and mental health (Harris & Fink, 1994), which is closely connected with employees' health well-being. Yet, there is little research that examines the links between perceived benefits schemes and health issues of employees. I found that employees' perceptions of statutory benefits schemes are negatively associated with emotional exhaustion. This is consistent with past studies showing that employee benefits elicit positive attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, including job satisfaction (Teti & Andriotto, 2013) and organisational commitment (Newman & Sheikh, 2012).

Fourth, most employee benefits literature is based on a western context (see an exception, Lin et al., 2010), while my study casts light on the legally mandated benefits as perceived by employees in China. Lin et al. (2010) interviewed 16 HR managers and identified the characteristics of both statutory and discretionary benefits schemes in China. Their research, however, was conducted ten years ago and so could not capture the up-to-date development of Chinese statutory benefits schemes in particular. My research on the distinctiveness of Chinese employees' cultural traits (e.g., traditionality, and high power distance) and China's socialist

market economy could provide a valuable opportunity to test and extend the generalisability of existing research on employee benefits (Newman & Sheikh, 2012). Indeed, previous studies in developed countries have suggested that the provision of benefits is able to attract and retain talented employees and motivate them to contribute additional discretionary effort (Dulebohn et al., 2009). My findings add to this stream of evidence by illuminating the relationships between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion in Chinese enterprises.

### **3.5.2 Practical implications**

This study has three key practical implications. First, managers should anticipate a relationship between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion. In the manufacturing industry, which is characterised by extensive work demands, employees are more likely to suffer from a higher level of burnout and stress (Conway et al., 2016). Scholars have proposed a bundle of well-being-oriented HR practices (e.g., investment in employees, organisational support, and positive social and physical workplace environment) with the purpose of promoting employee well-being (Guest, 2017). As such, organisations should make efforts to provide high-quality and fair benefits schemes (a positive form of organisational support) for employees and keep an eye on employee well-being. Considering that employees' experience of unfair benefits schemes may undermine the effectiveness of this investment, managers should prioritise delivering information about benefits schemes to employees in a consistent and fair manner, at the same time making sure that employees fully understand the well-being-oriented intention of these benefits schemes. That is, managers should prioritise not only designing and implementing high-quality and equal benefits schemes, but also unambiguously communicating the employee-oriented intentions behind them.

Second, as the provision of high-quality benefits schemes represents a high-cost investment for organisations (Lin et al., 2010), managers may adopt some other relatively economical methods to promote employee well-being. My findings showed the role of job involvement in

mitigating employees' emotional exhaustion in that it may help employees manage job-related demands and cope with the workplace pressures. In this regard, managers may encourage employees to manage health well-being issues by developing a psychological identification with their job. There are several strategies that managers can deploy to stimulate employees' job involvement, such as the establishment of a supportive organisational climate, clear and prompt feedback, participative decision making, and regular and straightforward communication (Brown, 1996).

Third, my results illuminate that high-traditionality employees are more likely to regard the benefits schemes as fair and of high quality than are low-traditionality ones. In other words, not all employees will respond to the same benefits schemes in a similar way. For this reason, managers need to be aware of variations in employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and tailor different communication tools to explain benefits schemes to different employees. Managers, for example, are advised to adopt formal and official communication methods, such as weekly meetings and daily feedback, to send employee-centred HRM messages to traditionalists. Conversely, managers may utilise informal strategies (e.g., unofficial talks and afterwork meetings) to communicate the well-being-oriented intentions behind HR practices to low-traditional employees in more details.

### **3.5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

A number of limitations should be acknowledged in this study. First, my data were collected in eight Chinese manufacturing companies, which may raise concerns about the generalisability of findings across industries, nations, and cultures. Larger, more representative and cross-contextual samples are needed for future research to test my results. Second, my data are time-lagged (one month apart), rather than longitudinal. I therefore suggest future research should consider using longitudinal data and exercise caution in identifying the causal relationships between perceptions of benefits schemes and employee well-being. Third, heeding Beijer et al.'s

(2019) call for investigating high evaluative constructs in HRM perceptions research, I measured two facets of perceived benefits schemes (fairness and quality). However, operationalizing two facets in a single item may lead to potential bias. Therefore, I suggest that future research should measure one specific facet of perceived content of HRM to avoid any bias. Fourth, the well-being effects I identified may not only be attributable to benefits schemes. In fact, companies which care about employee well-being can provide many other HR practices, such as training and development, flexible work schedules, and employee assistance programs. Based on the configurational perspective of HRM, the well-being effects may be contingent on other HR practices (perceptions) (Luo et al., 2020). For instance, employees who perceive that benefits schemes are unfair or low-quality may be satisfied with the employee assistance programs provided by the employing organisation. In this regard, the positive perceptions of employee assistance programs could counteract the negative impacts of unfair and low-quality benefits schemes on employee well-being. Hence, future research should adopt the configurational perspective of HRM in order to tease out the complex mechanisms through which benefits schemes impact employee well-being.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This study contributes to the extant HRM-well-being research by illuminating that employees' perceptions of benefits schemes influence emotional exhaustion via job involvement. Moreover, this study extends the current literature on HR perceptions by demonstrating the individual-level antecedent (Chinese traditionality) of perceived benefits schemes. I encourage future research to address how the impacts of HR perceptions on employee well-being vary across contexts, and raise awareness of many other personal and contextual variables which may predict HR perceptions.

## **Chapter 4. The joint impact of HRM attributions and HRM system consistency on employee well-being: A two-wave study**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Recent interest in perceived human resource management (HRM) has cast light on two main streams of research, namely HRM attributions (Nishii et al., 2008) and HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), to elucidate the relationship between perceived HRM and employee well-being (e.g., Alfes et al., 2012; Frenkel et al., 2012).

Nishii et al.'s (2008) seminal work laid the foundation of HRM attributions research by differentiating internal from external HRM attributions. Internal HRM attributions (e.g., well-being attributions and exploiting attributions) are defined as employees' perceptions that HR practices are adopted as a function of management's voluntary intentions. In contrast, external HRM attributions (e.g., union compliance attributions) refer to employees' interpretations that HR practices are implemented in order to conform to the external pressures, which are beyond managerial control. Despite Nishii et al.'s (2008) call for identifying external attributions beyond union compliance, subsequent research focused mainly on internal HRM attributions rather than external attributions (Hewett et al., 2018).

In addition to HRM attributions, another stream of perceived HRM research, HRM system strength, pays close attention to employee well-being. HRM system strength theory suggests that meta-features of HRM systems (distinctiveness, consistency and consensus) can enable employees to develop shared perceptions of the signals delivered by the HRM system, eliciting a strong climate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Most prior work considered HRM system strength as an overall construct. However, a specific single meta-feature of HRM system remains less explored. This is problematic, as differential meta-features will not be equally effective to form a strong climate (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). I chose HRM system consistent, rather than other meta-features of HRM system strength (e.g., distinctiveness and consensus), as it could be more theoretically relevant to employee well-being. In effect, HRM system consistency represents an important

meta-feature: a strong organisational climate context will emerge when employees perceive the existence of consistent messages delivered by the HRM system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In a consistent HRM system climate, employees tend to be more motivated at work (Li et al., 2012). Conversely, inconsistent HRM system represents a weak situation where employees may suffer from intense job-related stress because of cognitive confusion (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Responding to Hewett et al.'s (2018) call for combining these two distinct but inter-related perceived HRM theories, this study establishes an integrative framework which connects diverse forms of HRM attributions (both internal and external attributions) and a specific single meta-feature of HRM system strength (consistency) to employee well-being. First, drawing on the job demands–resources (JDR) model (Demerouti et al., 2001), I identify how distinct types of HRM attributions relate to employee well-being. Specifically, I regard internal HRM well-being attributions as employees' perceptions that sufficient job resources are available within the organisation, which promote employee well-being. In contrast, internal HRM exploiting attributions are considered as employees' interpretations that there are extensive job demands which have detrimental impacts on their well-being. Moreover, I propose a novel form of external HRM attributions, external Labour Law attributions, which refer to employees' attributions that HR practices are implemented to comply with the Labour Law. I explore Labour Law attributions in China because many non-state companies may not fully conform to the Labour Law in China (Friedman & Lee, 2010). Indeed, a large number of migrant workers are suffering from job-related injuries and may not be fully covered by social insurance, though the provision of social insurance is mandatory under the 1994 Labour Law (Zhu et al., 2014). In this regard, when employees perceive that HR practices are implemented to respond to the Labour Law, they will understand that the management provides them with job resources to protect their labour rights and promote their well-being. By differentiating internal attributions from external Labour Law attributions based on their distinct implications for employee well-being, this study extends existing literature that focuses mainly on internal HRM attributions.

Second, I propose that HRM attributions determine employee well-being because they activate the motivational process. Thriving at work is defined as a positive motivational state which evaluates individuals' joint sense of vitality and learning (Porath et al., 2012). By evaluating whether thriving at work acts as a motivational pathway, I seek to identify the underlying mechanisms through which HRM attributions influence well-being.

Third, I focus on an individual meta-feature (HRM system consistency), rather than the overall HRM system strength as a potential boundary condition for the relationship between HRM attributions and employee outcomes. In effect, a consistent HRM system context can predict employees' vigour, dedication, and absorption by offering unambiguous, valid and stable HR messages (Li et al., 2012). By assessing whether HRM system consistency operates as an important contingency affecting the impact of HRM attributions, I shed light on the context-driven nature of HRM perceptions (Wang et al., 2020).

In short, this study makes three main contributions to extant literature. First, this study is innovative, as I adopt the JDR model to differentiate the internal attributions from external HRM attributions based on their different effects on employee well-being. Second, this research provides a richer theoretical discussion of the HRM-well-being relationship by investigating a motivational mechanism (Jo et al., 2020). That is, I examine whether and how HRM attributions contribute to employees' positive psychological state (i.e., thriving at work), which can indirectly enhance employee well-being. Third, I address Hewett et al.'s (2018) observation that there is a paucity of research which combines two distinct but inter-connected streams of research (HRM attributions and HRM system strength) into one general framework in accounting for the impacts of perceived HRM on employee outcomes. Specifically, I focus on HRM system consistency as an important boundary condition for the relationship between HRM attributions and thriving at work. By considering HRM system consistency as an organisational climate context, this study advances our knowledge of the context-driven nature of HRM attributions and, for that matter,



explains how employees' attributions of HRM are to some extent shaped by the situational contexts.

## **4.2 Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

### **4.2.1 JDR, HRM attribution, thriving at work and employee well-being**

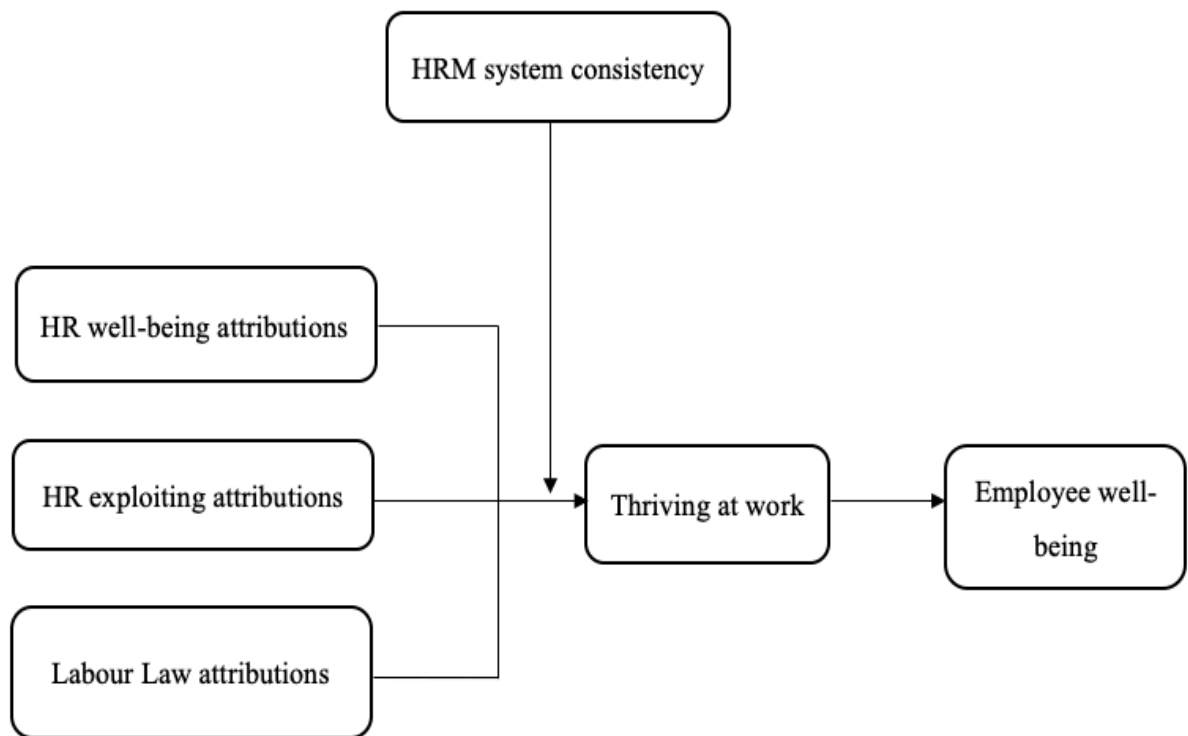
Perceived HRM research, associated with its two research streams, namely HRM attributions and HRM system strength, has put a spotlight on the relationship between perceived HRM and employee well-being (e.g., Alfes et al., 2012). Particularly, HRM attributions research argues that employees tend to make internal and external attributions about the intentions of HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008). Extant studies focused mainly on internal HRM attributions while external attributions remained less examined. This is not surprising, as scholars posit that internal HRM attributions are significantly associated with employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, while external attributions are weakly related to employee outcomes (Sanders et al., 2019). This assumption, however, may not be valid across contexts, in the sense that external attributions could be at play in collective countries where situational pressures are paramount (Fletcher & Ward, 1988). Drawing on the data collected in China, this study aims to differentiate internal attributions from external Labour Law attributions based on their distinct implications for employee well-being.

The JDR model (Demerouti et al., 2001) is considered one of the most popular employee well-being models, assuming two processes through which negative job characteristics (e.g., job demands) and their interaction with positive job characteristics (e.g., job resources) will influence the quality of well-being (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). The first is *the health impairment* process, which is sparked by extensive job demands and deficient job resources, which are expected to give rise to burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The second is *the motivational* process, positing that employee well-being results from both *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivational processes. Abundant job resources generate an *extrinsic* motivational mechanism as they stimulate

employees' willingness to dedicate compensatory efforts and enthusiasm to job tasks (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Moreover, job resources can activate an *intrinsic* motivational process in that they satisfy employees' innate need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and promote a positive job-related state of mind (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Based on the *motivational* mechanisms of the JDR model, I propose that thriving at work, which is defined as a positive job-related state of mind capturing individuals' joint sense of vitality and learning (Porath et al., 2012), operates as a motivational pathway through which HRM attributions affect employee well-being.

Another stream of perceived HRM research, HRM system strength, is also concerned with employee well-being. It is well documented that high HRM system strength will enhance employees' happiness well-being (Cafferkey et al., 2019; Li, Frenkel, & Sanders, 2011), and reduce employee health well-being issues, such as negative emotions (Frenkel et al., 2012). In order to contextualise HRM attributions, I examine a specific single meta-feature, HRM system consistency, as a potential boundary condition for the association between HRM attributions and thriving at work.

In sum, I posit that HRM attributions will influence employees' joint sense of vitality and learning in the workplace (thriving at work), thereby having impacts on employee well-being. I further investigate the potential boundary condition (HRM system consistency) for the relationship between HRM attributions and thriving at work. Figure 4.1 demonstrates my conceptual model. I elaborate on the model and hypotheses below.



**Figure 4.1 A conceptual model for Study Three**

#### **4.2.2 HRM attributions and employee well-being**

HRM well-being attribution is an internal attribution, which means that employees perceive that HR practices exist to improve employees' welfare, facilitate work skills, and offer abundant resources (Nishii et al., 2008). In fact, the provision of job resources delivers a message to employees that they are valuable to the organisations and that they deserve organisations appreciation and recognition of their well-being status (Shantz et al., 2016). The JDR model suggests that multitudes of job resources (e.g., job security, supervisory support, and performance feedback) are functional in enhancing employee well-being because they: (a) assist employees to accomplish job goals and fulfill personal needs; (b) reduce job obstacles and their negative physiological and psychological impacts; and (c) promote individual development (Demerouti et al., 2001). In line with the theoretical reasoning, prior research showed that HRM well-being attributions are likely to improve happiness well-being, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Nishii et al., 2008), attenuate health impairment costs like job strain (Van De

Voorde & Beijer, 2015), and reduce employees' turnover intentions (Lee et al., 2020). Therefore, I propose that:

***Hypothesis 1a: HRM well-being attributions will be positively related to employee well-being.***

HRM exploiting attribution is defined as an internal attribution that HR practices are designed to take as much as possible from employees, and managers are not concerned about employees' development and welfare (Nishii et al., 2008). In other words, more is demanded of employees without the provision of abundant job resources and organisational support (Chen & Wang, 2014). Examples of demands include work overload, job pressure, and role conflict (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). When employees perceive that the level of employment exploitation is high and job demands are extensive, they need to exert sustained physical or psychological effort to cope with work overload and attain job goals (Van den Broeck et al., 2008). As a result, employees are inclined to suffer from physical and mental health impairment outcomes, including fatigue, anxiety and burnout (Kilroy et al., 2016). Previous research reported that HRM exploiting attributions are negatively associated with employee satisfaction and commitment (Nishii et al., 2008), and perceived organisational support (Chen & Wang, 2014), all of which represent key components of employee well-being. Therefore, I propose that:

***Hypothesis 1b: HRM exploiting attributions will be negatively related to employee well-being.***

Nishii et al. (2008) emphasise the role of external HRM attributions in accounting for employee outcomes. In their study, the external attribution is the perception that HR practices are designed to comply with the union requirements. They presumed that external union compliance attributions are not significantly associated with employee outcomes because both positive and negative outcomes coexist and they cancel each other out. Nishii et al.'s (2008) proposition is

primarily based on the western context and subsequent studies have left out the importance of external attributions across contexts. I maintain that the insufficient attention to external HRM attributions is problematic because external attributions could be more influential in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures (Fletcher & Ward, 1988). As such, comparative studies of external HRM attributions may be important.

In order to differentiate internal from external HRM attributions in collectivistic cultures, this study investigates the Labour Law as an external HRM attribution in the Chinese context. I focused on Labour Law external attributions rather than union compliance attributions proposed by Nishii et al. (2008) because Chinese unions operate like governmental agencies and lack formal powers to protect workers (Friedman & Lee, 2010). Labour Law external attributions refer to the degree to which employees understand that HR practices are adopted to conform to the Chinese Labour Law. In 2008, the Chinese government launched a series of labour legislations, including the Labour Contract Law, the Employment Promotion Law, and the Labour Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law, all of which aim to circumvent employment exploitation and protect the labour rights of employees (Cooke, 2011). However, it has been argued that the enforcement of the Labour Law and state supervision are weak and ineffective: a large number of employees, especially those working in small- and medium-sized companies, may still be subject to long working hours, poor health and safety provisions, and inadequate social insurances (Friedman & Lee, 2010). In fact, many migrant workers in China are suffering from workplace injuries and they might not be fully covered by social insurance, though the provision of social insurance is mandatory under the 1994 Labour Law (Zhu et al., 2014). In a context where labour rights violation is not uncommon, when employees perceive that HR practices are adopted to respond to the Labour Law, they will believe that managers pay close attention to providing protection of their rights and well-being. Hence, employees are likely to get access to multiple forms of legal and job resources to blunt employment exploitation and the associated health impairment outcomes (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). On the contrary, managers' failure to comply with the Labour

Law tends to deliver a signal to employees that managers are not concerned about employees' legal rights, occupational health and safety. As such, employees are expected only to have access to poor workplace resources and experience intensification of their workload, resulting in a series of physiological and psychological problems, including fatigue and gradual draining of psychological resources (Van den Broeck, et al., 2008). Taken together, I posit that:

***Hypothesis 1c: Labour Law external attributions will be positively related to employee well-being.***

#### **4.2.3 Thriving at work and its mediating role**

Responding to Boxall, Guthrie and Paauwe's (2016) suggestion that employee-related mediation variables should be emphasised when the focus is on well-being in HRM research, this study is concerned with the mediating influence of thriving at work, which reflects employees' eudaimonic and hedonic components of well-being (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). Individuals with a high level of thriving at work possess a positive job-related state of mind characterised by two facets: (a) *vitality* and (b) *learning* (Porath et al., 2012). First, individuals who experience *vitality* and flourishing are likely to become more psychologically healthy, and less likely to experience depression and stress (Jo et al., 2020). Indeed, the positive affective dimensions of thriving (e.g., vitality) can give employees an important psychological capacity (e.g., resilience) to address work intensification, job demands, and stressful environments (Poarth et al., 2012). Second, employees with a sustained sense of *learning* are less likely to suffer from physical and mental health problems (Poarth et al., 2012). This is because employees engaged in learning activities are able to absorb and harness new knowledge, skills, and competence to fulfill their work requirements and meet job demands (Guan & Frenkel, 2019).

According to the JDR model, employees will be more engaged in the workplace and feel more physically and mentally healthy when they perceive that there are abundant resources and low demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). That is, the associations between HRM attributions

and well-being may be indirect, since they spark both *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivational processes. Employees' vigour, dedication, and thriving can be activated through the motivational processes, which will in turn impact employee well-being (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Specifically, the availability of perceived job resources (e.g., HRM well-being attributions and Labour Law attributions) and the absence of perceived job demands (e.g., HRM exploiting attributions) can activate the *extrinsic* motivational process, in the sense that they stimulate employees to dedicate compensatory effort and vigour to their job (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014), thereby tempering their feelings of burnout and improving their positive health (Walumbwa et al., 2018). Furthermore, the perceptions of plentiful supportive resources and fewer work demands may generate the *intrinsic* motivational process, as they satisfy employees' innate need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). All these basic psychological needs relate to employees' work engagement (Van den Broeck et al., 2008), a concept similar to thriving at work, which will indirectly influence employee well-being (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Therefore, I hypothesise that:

***Hypothesis 2:*** *Thriving at work mediates the relationship between (a) HRM well-being attributions, (b) HRM exploiting attributions, (c) Labour Law attributions, and employee well-being.*

#### **4.2.4 The moderating role of HRM system consistency**

Thus far, research on the boundary conditions of HRM attributions that affect employee outcomes remains relatively scarce. This is a significant research gap, in that employees' HRM attributions are not only based on the internal features of the stimulus per se (e.g., HR practices) but also on the external context of the stimulus (Kelley, 1973). In order to fill the gap, this study explores the organisational climate conditions under which the impacts of HRM attributions are maximised.

As an important meta-feature of HRM system strength, HRM system consistency is defined as an unambiguous, valid, and stable organisational climate where HRM systems are able to consistently communicate to employees the organisation's values, purposes, and practices (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). In fact, three sub-features of HRM system consistency — instrumentality, validity, and consistent HRM messages — help employees develop a consistent understanding of cause-effect relationship with regard to the HRM system and its associated employee outcomes. On the other hand, employees are likely to have ambiguous or contradictory perceptions of HRM systems in an inconsistent climate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Previous empirical research has documented that HRM system consistency acts as a moderating variable of the relationship between leader-member exchange and employee outcomes, because a consistent HRM system is likely to help employees comprehend managerial practices better over time and across different contexts (Li et al., 2012). In addition, according to organisational climate theory, climate strength normally amplifies the influences of organisational practices on employee outcomes (Schneider et al., 2002). Building on the existing empirical research and theoretical underpinning, I expect that HRM system consistency moderates the effects of HRM attributions on employees' thriving at work, such that the relationships will be stronger when HRM system consistency is high. Specifically, when the organisational values espoused by the managers are consistent with the values inferred by the employees, employees tend to develop a clearer understanding of the intentions behind HR practices and have explicit cues about how and why HR practices are implemented (Nishii et al., 2008). Therefore, employees are 'more confident about attributing this as having benign influences on their work experience' (Li et al., 2011, p. 1828). Furthermore, a second dimension for HRM system consistency is the internal alignment among HR practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In an organisation where HR practices complement each other and team up to achieve superior organisational performance, employees will form attributions of the HR practices as a whole. As such, employees are more likely to be engaged in job-related attitudes and behaviours which are validly aligned with their



overall HR attributions (Shantz et al., 2016). Moreover, the third dimension of HRM system consistency refers to compatibility and stability in the messages delivered by the HR practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). If the organisation's HR practices remain stable over time, there may be stronger agreement among employees with regard to the organisation's actual values and goals (Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994). Accordingly, employees are more inclined to strengthen their attitudes and behaviours, making the role of HRM attributions in thriving at work more prominent. Taken together, I present the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 3:*** *HRM system consistency will moderate the relationship between (a) HRM well-being attributions, (b) HRM exploiting attribution, (c) Labour Law attributions and thriving at work such that the relationship is stronger when HRM system consistency is higher.*

## **4.3 Methods**

### **4.3.1 Procedure and sample**

Data in this research were collected from eight manufacturing firms located in three cities (Beijing, Daqing and Suzhou) in China during May 2019 and January 2020. Indeed, Study 2 and Study 3 targeted the same eight firms and were conducted at the same time. A wide range of HR practices (e.g., training and development, benefits and rewards, selection, performance appraisal, and scheduling systems) examined in this study are implemented in these firms. I used personal connections to approach senior or HR managers to facilitate the distribution of the surveys to participants with a time lag of one month. Asking managers to administer surveys is quite common in China (Li et al., 2017), in part due to the fact that employees tend not to respond to researchers who do not know them and they are more likely to respond to requests from their managers. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed in the six firms located in Suzhou. In the two firms based in Daqing and Beijing, managers used Wechat to forward web-based surveys to participants. In order to ensure that my results are reliable, the purpose of this academic research was explained to managers and they were asked to encourage participants to provide their

responses and to reflect their views accurately. Furthermore, participants were assured that the questionnaires were anonymous, and that their answers would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes. To incentivise participation in the survey and provide truthful answers, participants were offered the opportunity to win a small gift after they completed the questionnaire.

At Time 1, the questionnaire asked the participants to offer their demographic details (e.g., age, gender, educational background, and tenure) and report HRM attributions, HRM system consistency, and thriving at work. In firms in Suzhou, 251 participants completed the paper-based questionnaires. In firms in Beijing and Daqing, completed web-based questionnaires were received from 180 respondents. A total of 431 questionnaires were received for Time 1.

One month later (Time 2), managers invited the same participants to complete either the paper-based or the web-based questionnaire which assessed employee well-being. Managers helped me carefully match participants' second-wave answers with their first-wave responses.

After excluding responses with missing information on focal variables in this study, I received 279 paired and valid responses, which represents a final response rate of 65%. Of the 279 respondents, males accounted for 61.8 percent; just over half (53.1 percent) were aged between 25 and 35. In terms of the education level, 39.5 percent had a bachelor's degree ( $SD = 1.02$ , median = 4). Seventy-seven respondents (33.8 percent) had worked in the organisation less than three years.

#### **4.3.2 Measures**

The questionnaire items were initially designed by the researchers in English. Then one bilingual researcher translated the questionnaire into Chinese and back-translated it into English, following the back-translation processes (Brislin, 1970).

Before the formal fieldwork, I conducted informal interviews with four participants and asked them to provide feedback on the measurement items. In doing so, I aimed to ensure that the

survey items were culturally reliable and clearly understood by participants (Cooper et al., 2019). The items were finalised with some minor revisions in expression.

I used five-point Likert scales to measure all the items except for control variables. Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. All items in my survey are listed in Appendix [letter].

*HRM attributions.* HRM attributions are measured by three variables: HRM well-being attributions, HRM exploiting attributions, and Labour Law attributions. Following Nishii et al.'s (2008) measurements, this study focuses on employees' attributions of five fundamental HR practices, including training, rewards, hiring, employee scheduling, and performance appraisal. Samples include "This organisation provides employees with training and development to promote employee well-being." The Cronbach's alpha for the HRM well-being attributions was 0.90, for the exploiting attributions was 0.94, and for Labour Law attributions was 0.90.

*HRM system consistency.* I adapted a nine-item scale developed by Delmotte, De Winne and Sels (2012) to measure HRM system consistency. Specifically, I assessed the following three features of a consistent HRM system: *instrumentality*, *validity*, and *consistent HRM messages*. Samples include "In this organisation, there is clear consistency of HRM messages between words and deeds of the HR department." The Cronbach's alpha for HRM system consistency was 0.91.

*Thriving at work.* This variable captures both *learning* and *vitality* dimensions. The measurement of thriving at work was sourced from the 10-item scale developed by Porath and his colleagues (2012). Sample items include "I am improving my performance a lot." The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was .73.

*Employee well-being.* I adopted a five-item scale for employee well-being from Alfes, Shantz, and Truss (2012). These items were originally developed from the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1978). Sample items included "I have confidence in myself." The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .81.

*Controls.* I controlled for the demographic details, including age (measured as a categorical variable: 1 = below 25, to 5 = 56-70), gender (male = 1 and female = 2), educational background (1 = primary school to 6 = masters and above), and organisational tenure (1 = below three years to 4 = above ten years) because these variables can influence employee well-being outcomes (Jo et al., 2020).

### **4.3.3 Statistical analysis**

Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), I adopted the steps proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) coupled with bootstrapping methods to test for mediation. Moreover, in line with prior work (Cafferkey et al., 2019), I utilised Model 7 of the PROCESS macro tool based on bootstrapping methods to explore the moderated hypotheses. Four covariates, including employee age, gender, education, and tenure, were included in all hypothesised models. All variables were centred to minimise multicollinearity. I verified my models by using 5,000 bootstraps and 95 percent confidence interval.

## **4.4 Results**

### **4.4.1 Confirmatory factor analyses**

I performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS to evaluate whether the measurement scales used in this present study are distinct from each other. The hypothesised six-factor measurement model included all constructs. In order to maintain a good indicator-to-factor ratio and reduce measurement errors (Landis et al., 2000), I created five parcels of indicators for thriving at work and HRM system consistency, and three parcels of indicators for the remaining variables. Specifically, the two items with the strongest and weakest factor loadings were parcelled, and then the two items with the second strongest and weakest factor loadings were parcelled, and so on.

The CFA results demonstrated that the proposed six-factor model fits the data well:  $\chi^2 = 443.439$ ,  $df = 194$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.931, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.942, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.068. As indicated in Table 4.1, my proposed six-factor model showed a better fit than the parsimonious factor models. In summary, these results supported construct validity of my measures.

**Table 4.1 Comparison of measurement models: Fit indices**

Models	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\chi^2$ /df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Hypothesised six-factor model	443.44 (194)	2.286	0.943	0.931	0.942	0.068
Five-factor model A	840.01(199)	4.221	0.853	0.828	0.852	0.108
Five-factor model B	937.12(199)	4.709	0.831	0.802	0.830	0.116
Five-factor model C	844.43(199)	4.243	0.852	0.827	0.851	0.108
Four-factor model	1420.18(203)	6.996	0.721	0.680	0.719	0.147
Three-factor model	1753.42 (206)	8.512	0.645	0.599	0.643	0.164
Two-factor model	2113.18 (208)	10.160	0.562	0.511	0.560	0.182
One-factor model	2444.71 (209)	11.697	0.486	0.429	0.484	0.196

Notes: WA = well-being attributions; EA = exploiting attributions; LLA = Labour Law attributions; HRMSC = HRM system consistency; TAW = thriving at work; EW = employee well-being.

Five-factor model A: combining WA and EA into one factor

Five-factor model B: combining WA and LLA into one factor

Five-factor model C: combining HRMSC and TAW into one factor

Four-factor model: combining WA, EA, and LLA into one factor

Three-factor model: combining WA, EA, and LLA into one factor; combining TAW and EW into one factor

Two-factor model: combining WA, EA and LLA into one factor; combining HRMSC, TAW and EW into one factor

One-factor model: all variables were combined

Since all the variables used in the current research were reported by the same group of subjects, I need to assess the potential risk of common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff, McKenie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Following Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) procedures, I added an unmeasured latent method factor to my proposed measurement model to examine whether it significantly improved the fit statistics. The results indicated that the chi-square difference test between my

original measurement model and the latent method factor model was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2(df) = 110(22)$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, it is argued that chi-square values are sensitive to a large number of sample sizes and variables (Hair et al., 2014). I therefore used the difference of CFI values as suggested by Byrne (2001) to evaluate the overall model fit improvement. The change of CFI values between my original measurement model and the latent method factor model was 0.021, which is below the threshold of 0.05 (Alfes et al., 2013). The result revealed that the introduction of a latent method factor did not significantly improve my model fit. Therefore, the potential CMB may not be a serious concern.

#### **4.4.2 Descriptive statistics**

The descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlation results are demonstrated in Table 4.2. Correlations among all the variables are in line with my expectations.

**Table 4.2 Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations (N=279)**

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	2.30	.86	NA									
2. Gender	1.40	.49	-.05	NA								
3. Education	4.08	1.01	-.39**	-.06	NA							
4. Tenure	2.20	1.08	.56**	-.04	-.22**	NA						
5. Well-being attribution	3.69	.89	.00	-.00	-.04	.06	(.90)					
6. Exploiting attribution	1.87	.94	.07	.01	-.04	-.01	-.52**	(.94)				
7. Labour Law attribution	3.54	.89	.09	-.05	-.07	.13**	.39**	-.18**	(.90)			
8. Thriving at work	3.54	.53	-.06	-.05	-.05	-.15**	.49**	-.33**	.23**	(.73)		
9. HRM system consistency	3.41	.77	.03	-.04	-.10	.02	.52**	-.61**	.29**	.39**	(.91)	
10. Employee well-being	3.78	.69	.05	-.04	-.04	.03	.32**	-.32**	.20**	.25**	.31**	(.81)

*Note:* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . age: 1= below 25, 2= 25-35, 3= 36-45, 4= 46-55, 5= 56-60; gender: 1= male, 2= female; education: 1= primary school, 2= secondary school, 3= technical secondary school or high school, 4= three-year college, 5= bachelor, 6= masters and above; tenure: 1= below three years, 2= three to five years, 3= five to ten years, 4= above ten years. Alpha-reliability coefficients are on the diagonal in parentheses.

#### 4.4.3 Hypothesis tests

H1 proposed that employees' HRM attributions would be significantly related to employee well-being. As indicated in Table 4.3, after controlling for employee age, gender, level of education, tenure, and thriving at work, HRM well-being attributions are positively associated with employee well-being ( $b = 0.322$ ,  $t = 5.606$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); HRM exploiting attributions are negatively related to employee well-being ( $b = -0.324$ ,  $t = -5.636$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); Labour Law external attributions are positively related to employee well-being ( $b = 0.198$ ,  $t = 3.315$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c are all supported.



**Table 4.3 Regression results for testing direct and indirect effects**

Predictor	b	SE	t
<i>Direct and total effects</i>			
Well-being attribution → Thriving at work (a)	0.500**	0.030	9.705
Thriving at work → Employee well-being, controlling for well-being attribution (b)	0.121	0.088	1.803
Well-being attribution → Employee well-being (c)	0.322**	0.044	5.606
Age → Employee well-being	0.055	0.059	0.743
Gender → Employee well-being	-0.043	0.081	-0.739
Education → Employee well-being	-0.013	0.042	-0.208
Tenure → Employee well-being	-0.026	0.044	-0.375
Well-being attribution → Employee well-being, controlling for thriving at work (c')	0.261**	0.051	3.941
<i>Bootstrapping results for indirect effects</i>	Effect	Bootstrap SE	95% CI (LL UL)
Well-being attribution → Thriving at work → Employee well-being	0.0461	0.0314	(-0.0101, 0.1133)
<i>Direct and total effects</i>			

Exploiting attribution → Thriving at work (a)	-0.341**	0.031	-6.085
Thriving at work → Employee well-being, controlling for exploiting attribution (b)	0.161**	0.080	2.631
Exploiting attribution → Employee well-being (c)	-0.324**	0.042	-5.636
Age → Employee well-being	0.069	0.059	0.936
Gender → Employee well-being	-0.041	0.081	-0.721
Education → Employee well-being	-0.032	0.042	-0.511
Tenure → Employee well-being	-0.024	0.044	-0.342
Exploiting attribution → Employee well-being, controlling for thriving at work (c')	-0.268**	0.044	-4.436
<i>Bootstrapping results for indirect effects</i>	Effect	Bootstrap SE	95% CI (LL UL)
Exploiting attribution → Thriving at work → Employee well-being	-0.0404	0.0206	(-0.0850, -0.0029)
<i>Direct and total effects</i>			
Labour Law attribution → Thriving at work (a)	0.249**	0.034	4.274
Thriving at work → Employee well-being, controlling for Labour Law attribution (b)	0.219**	0.080	3.596

Labour Law attribution → Employee well-being (c)	0.198**	0.046	3.315
Age → Employee well-being	0.032	0.061	0.415
Gender → Employee well-being	-0.035	0.084	-0.594
Education → Employee well-being	-0.020	0.044	-0.311
Tenure → Employee well-being	-0.020	0.046	-0.282
Labour Law attribution → Employee well-being, controlling for thriving at work (c')	0.144*	0.046	2.379
<i>Bootstrapping results for indirect effects</i>	Effect	Bootstrap SE	95% CI (LL UL)
Labour Law attribution → Thriving at work → Employee well-being	0.0418	0.0205	(0.0104, 0.0900)

Note: b = standardised coefficient; CI = Confidence level; LL = Lower limit; UL = Upper limit. \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01

H2 predicted that thriving at work would mediate the relationships between HRM attributions and employee well-being. As demonstrated in Table 4.3, HRM well-being attributions are positively related to thriving at work ( $b = 0.500$ ,  $t = 9.705$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Nevertheless, thriving at work is not significantly related to employee well-being ( $p = 0.07$ ) after controlling for HRM well-being attributions. In addition, the indirect results showed that thriving at work did not mediate the relationship between HRM well-being attributions and employee well-being, because the 95% CI for the indirect effect included zero. Thus, H2(a) is not supported.

The direct effect of HRM exploiting attributions on thriving at work is significant ( $b = -0.341$ ,  $t = -6.085$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). After controlling for HRM exploiting attributions, thriving at work, in turn, made a positively significant impact on employee well-being ( $b = 0.161$ ,  $t = 2.631$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). I then controlled for the influence of thriving at work on employee well-being, and discovered that the relationship between HRM exploiting attributions and employee well-being decreased ( $b$  was reduced from  $-0.324$  to  $-0.268$ ) but was still significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests a partially indirect effect. Bootstrapping results further revealed that the indirect effect of thriving at work between HRM exploiting attributions and employee well-being is significantly negative (effect =  $-0.0404$ , 95%CI =  $-0.0850$ ,  $-0.0029$ ). Similarly, bootstrapping results further showed that the indirect effect of thriving at work between Labour Law attributions and employee well-being is significantly positive (effect =  $0.0418$ , 95%CI =  $0.0104$ ,  $0.0900$ ). Therefore, both H2(b) and H2(c) are supported. Taken together, H2 is partially supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposes that HRM system consistency could moderate the association between HRM attributions and thriving at work. I used PROCESS Model 7 and added the interaction terms between each independent variable (HRM well-being attributions, HRM exploiting attributions and Labour Law attributions) and HRM system consistency to the regression model. The results in Table 4.4 imply that the moderator (HRM system consistency) and its interaction term with HRM well-being attributions related positively to thriving at work ( $b = 0.0663$ ,  $t = 2.0265$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , CI =  $0.0019$ ,  $0.1308$ ), the index of moderated mediation is

0.0105 (BootSE = 0.0098, BootLLCI = -0.0073, BootULCI = 0.0318); its interaction term with HRM exploiting attributions related negatively to thriving at work ( $b = -0.1673$ ,  $t = -4.4855$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $CI = -0.2407, -0.0939$ ), the index of moderated mediation is -0.0353 (BootSE = 0.0238, BootLLCI = -0.0907, BootULCI = -0.0003). However, its interaction term with Labour Law attributions is not significantly associated with thriving at work ( $b = -0.0046$ ,  $t = -0.1251$ ,  $p = 0.9005$ ,  $CI = -0.0771, 0.0679$ ), the index of moderated mediation is -0.0013 (BootSE = 0.0160, BootLLCI = -0.0384, BootULCI = 0.0264).

**Table 4.4 Regression results for examining moderation of HRM system strength (PROCESS, Model 7)**

Predictor	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Model A						
	Thriving at work			Bootstrapped 95%CI		
Well-being attribution (WA)	0.2593	0.0360	7.2077	<0.01**	0.1884	0.3301
HRM system consistency (HRMSC)	-0.1392	0.1345	-1.0353	0.0104*	0.0249	0.1857
WA * HRMSC	0.0663	0.0327	2.0265	0.0437*	0.0019	0.1308
Age	0.0143	0.0397	0.3609	0.7184	-0.0639	0.0926
Gender	-0.0434	0.0545	-0.7969	0.4262	-0.1506	0.0638
Education	-0.0275	0.0286	-0.9612	0.3373	-0.0838	0.0288
Tenure	-0.1065	0.0298	-3.5762	<0.01**	-0.1651	-0.0479
Model B						
	Thriving at work			Bootstrapped 95%CI		
Exploiting attribution (EA)	-0.1887	0.0432	-4.3709	<0.01**	-0.2737	-0.1037
HRM system consistency (HRMSC)	0.1634	0.0459	3.5586	<0.01**	0.0730	0.2537
EA * HRMSC	-0.1673	0.0373	-4.4855	<0.01**	-0.2407	-0.0939
Age	0.0306	0.0415	0.7371	0.4617	-0.0511	0.1123
Gender	-0.0399	0.0567	-0.7034	0.4824	-0.1514	0.0717
Education	-0.0140	0.0301	-0.4658	0.6418	-0.0733	0.0453
Tenure	-0.1079	0.0312	-3.4609	<0.01**	-0.1692	-0.0465
Model C						
	Thriving at work			Bootstrapped 95%CI		
Labour Law attribution (LLA)	0.0867	0.0336	2.5784	0.0105*	0.0205	0.1529
HRM system consistency (HRMSC)	0.2368	0.0403	5.8743	<0.01**	0.1574	0.3161
LLA * HRMSC	-0.0046	0.0368	-0.1251	0.9005	-0.0771	0.0679

Age	0.0065	0.0428	0.1524	0.8790	-0.0777	0.0907
Gender	-0.0390	0.0587	-0.6642	0.5072	-0.1544	0.0765
Education	-0.0233	0.0308	-0.7561	0.4503	-0.0840	0.0374
Tenure	-0.0951	0.0321	-2.9602	<0.01**	-0.1583	-0.0318

Note: LLCI = Lower limit confidence level; ULCI = Upper limit confidence level. \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01

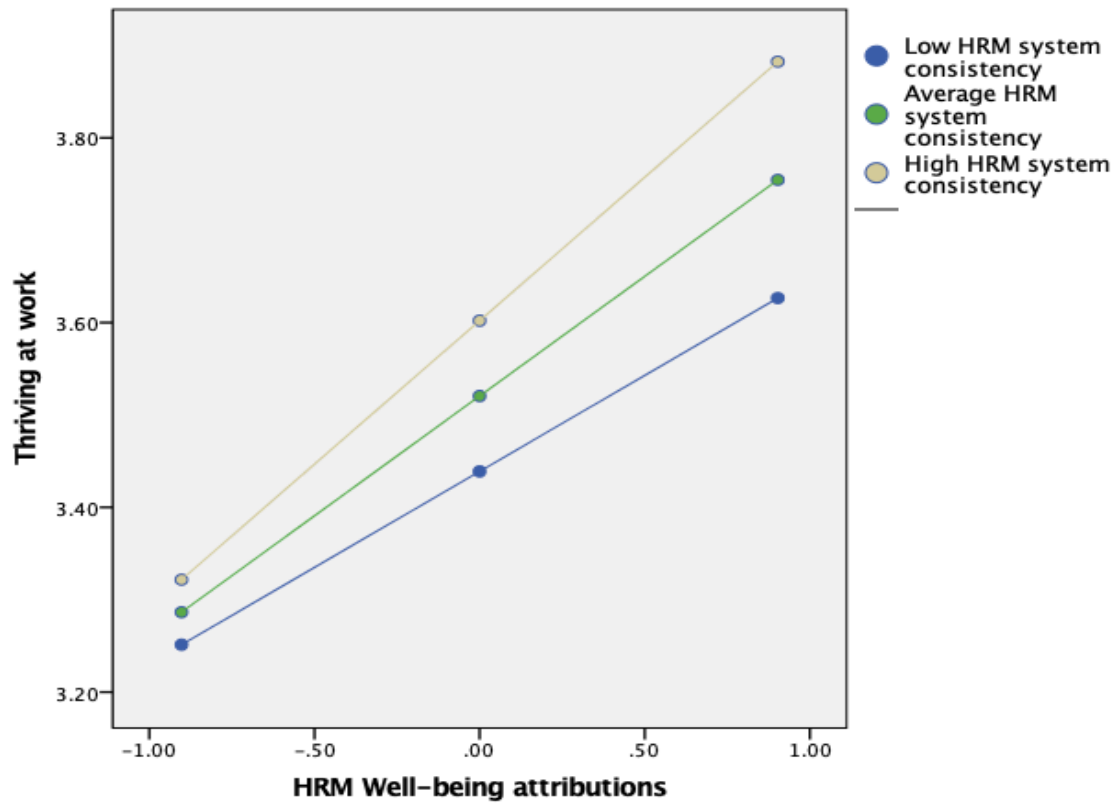
PROCESS output further illuminates the conditional effects of focal predicts (HRM well-being attributions and exploiting attributions) on thriving at work at values of the moderator (HRM system consistency) (see Table 4.5). In line with previous research (Guan & Frenkel, 2019), I use the conventional ‘pick-a-point’ approach (one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator). The results reveal that there is a positive relationship between HRM well-being attributions and thriving at work at three levels of HRM system consistency and that the effect becomes more positive when the level of HRM system consistency is higher. In addition, the findings show that the conditional effect of HRM exploiting attributions on thriving at work is not significant at the low level of HRM system consistency (mean - 1SD) and that the effect becomes more negative under the condition of a higher level of HRM system consistency: the conditional effect is -0.1887 ( $t = -4.3709$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) at the mean level of HRM system consistency; the conditional effect is -0.3183 ( $t = -5.0694$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) at the high level of HRM system consistency. As a whole, these results support both H3(a) and H3(b). Nonetheless, H3(c) is not supported. Hence, Hypothesis 3 is partially supported.



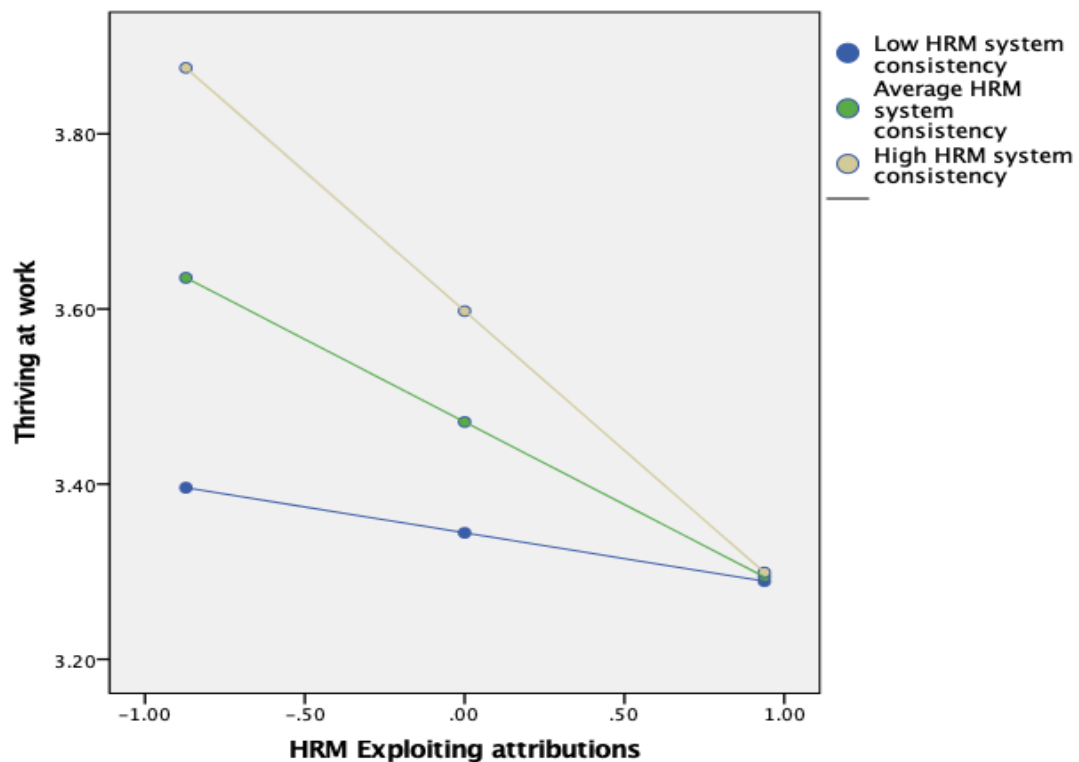
**Table 4.5 Conditional effects of HRM attributions on thriving at work at values of moderator (HRM system consistency)**

Independent variable	Value of moderator (HRM system consistency)	Conditional effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	UUCI
HRM well-being attribution	Low (mean – 1SD)	0.2079	0.0373	5.5670	<0.01**	0.1344	0.2814
	Mean	0.2593	0.0360	7.2077	<0.01**	0.1884	0.3301
	High (mean + 1SD)	0.3107	0.0498	6.2379	<0.01**	0.2126	0.4087
HRM exploiting attribution	Low (mean – 1SD)	-0.0591	0.0381	-1.5483	0.1227	-0.1341	0.0160
	Mean	-0.1887	0.0432	-4.3709	<0.01**	-0.2737	-0.1037
	High (mean + 1SD)	-0.3183	0.0628	-5.0694	<0.01**	-0.4420	-0.1947

I plotted the slopes for the association between HRM attributions and thriving at work at three levels of the moderator (HRM system consistency) in order to visualise the results (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3).



**Figure 4.2 The moderating effect of HRM system consistency on the relationship between HRM well-being attributions and thriving at work**



**Figure 4.3 The moderating effect of HRM system consistency on the relationship between HRM exploiting attributions and thriving at work**

## 4.5 Discussion

### 4.5.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes a number of theoretical contributions. First, this study advances our understanding of the differential influences of internal and external HRM attributions on employee well-being, particularly the latter, which remains under-investigated. Identifying employees' external HRM attributions is important, given the context-specific nature of perceived HRM (Wang et al., 2020). In line with prior research, my results revealed that internal well-being attributions have a positive effect on employee well-being, while there is a negative relationship between internal exploiting attributions and well-being. Contrary to previous work suggesting that external HRM attributions did not exert a significant influence on employee outcomes (Nishii et al., 2008), my study found that Labour Law attributions show a significantly positive relationship with employee well-being. The differential findings have theoretical implications for contextualising HRM attributions. Indeed, most prior studies are rooted in the individualistic

context where employees pay more attention to individuals' capabilities and competency, and hence are more cognitively inclined to develop internal HRM attributions than external attributions. External attributions, however, may be more salient in the collectivistic context, where situational pressures are more paramount, and therefore employees are more predisposed to respond to environmental information (Fletcher & Ward, 1988). In other words, the impacts of external attributions vary across cultures and countries. Using data collected in China, this study suggests that when employees perceive that HR practices are implemented to respond to the Labour Law, they will believe that management is concerned about employees' legal rights, and occupational health. This particular form of external attribution is related to the Chinese employment context where labour rights violation (e.g., long working hours, and non-contribution to social insurances) is common (Friedman & Lee, 2010).

Second, I adopted the motivational mechanisms of the JDR model in explaining the motivational processes through which HRM attributions influence employee well-being, namely through shaping employees' thriving at work. In doing so, I heeded Boxall et al.'s (2016) suggestion that more attention should be paid to employee-related mediators when researching employee well-being in HRM. Thriving at work underscores an important form of employees' positive job-related motivation in the sense that it will stimulate their willingness to dedicate compensatory efforts to the job tasks (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014), which at the same time satisfies their innate need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), both of which relate to employee well-being. I found that the *motivational* mechanisms of the JDR model could have explanatory power only in the relationship between two specific forms of HRM attributions and well-being. Contrary to my prediction, thriving at work did not mediate the relationship between internal HRM well-being attributions and well-being. It is intuitively plausible that well-being attributions are temporally closer to, and have a stronger influence on, employee well-being than other HRM attributions. Therefore, future research should exercise caution in using the

*motivational* process of the JDR model as a core theoretical framework and should investigate how employee-related mediators vary across different forms of HRM attributions.

Third, I establish a framework combining two distinct streams of perceived HRM research in order to examine the organisational climate conditions (HRM system consistency) under which the effect of HRM attributions on thriving at work are maximised. Indeed, employees' HRM attributions are not only based on the internal features of the stimulus per se (e.g., HR practices) but also on the external context of the stimulus (Hewett et al., 2018). I found that HRM system consistency moderated the relationship between internal HRM attributions and thriving at work. Contrary to my expectation, the interaction of external HRM attributions (Labour Law attributions) and HRM system consistency does not have a significant impact on thriving at work. Although previous literature proposed that two different streams of perceived HRM could become complementary and team up to exert impacts upon employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Hewett et al., 2018), my results indicate that the organisational climate context and external HRM attributions might work in silos to influence thriving at work. These results suggest that theory and research on organisational context should consider the different forms of HRM attributions and their divergent relationships with employee outcomes.

#### **4.5.2 Practical implications**

First, managers should understand that managing the well-being of the workforce is an important part of HRM for responsible organisations. In fact, organisations high in corporate social responsibility are committed to enhancing their employees' job satisfaction and affective commitment (Zhou, Luo, & Tang, 2018). One effective strategy to promote employees' job satisfaction and improve their well-being is to implement well-being-oriented HR practices. My results demonstrate that employees tend to make different attributions of the same HR practices. It is possible that employees interpret that HR practices are in place to exploit them even when the content of these practices is designed to value human capital and promote their well-being.

Accordingly, managers are advised not only to implement well-being-oriented HR practices, but also to acknowledge the importance of communicating HR practices to employees in a clear and appropriate way (Lee et al., 2020). This will help employees to appreciate fully the well-being-oriented intention behind these practices.

Second, considering that thriving at work plays a significant role in the association between HRM attributions and well-being, managers should make efforts to improve their employees' positive, job-related mindset, by encouraging them to be interested in learning, to remain energetic and optimistic at work, and to develop resilience. These positive feelings can be beneficial to managing job demands, reducing workplace pressures, and mitigating health-related problems. It is important to note that the goal of helping employees to develop a positive job-related state of mind cannot be achieved in the short term. Organisations should therefore invest in creating a learning-friendly environment in the long run.

Third, my study reveals that a consistent HRM system can increase the level of thriving at work and promote employee well-being. A consistent HRM system underscores the communicative processes between managers and employees, and simultaneously highlights employees' concerns and interests (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). In challenging and stressful workplaces, I would recommend managers foster mutuality by clarifying what is rewarded, appreciated and valued, and encouraging employees to develop an accurate perception of the HRM system.

#### **4.5.3 Limitations and future research directions**

There are several limitations in this study. First, my research findings may be inflated due to the single-source response bias. Nevertheless, the notion of HRM attributions is conceptually different from employee well-being, and hence the self-report data may not be a serious concern. Moreover, I used the unmeasured latent factor method to ascertain that common method bias is insufficient to invalidate my results.

Second, well-being in my study is primarily measured by emotional components which were validated by Alfes et al. (2012). Recent literature has observed that well-being is a multi-dimensional construct comprising *health*, *happiness* and *relational* aspects (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). It is argued that HR practices are likely to have positive impacts on one dimension of well-being, while negatively influencing others (Guerci et al., 2019). As such, future research should expand the scope of well-being by exploring the association between one specific HRM attribution and distinct dimensions of employee well-being, including mental well-being (e.g., commitment, satisfaction, and psychosomatic problems) and physical well-being (i.e., cardiovascular conditions and occupational diseases).

Third, this research is only concerned with a particular form of external attributions (Labour Law attributions) in one country (China). In fact, there are a wide range of other external HRM attributions, such as organisational intention to imitate competitors or to meet the demands of information technology in today's global economy. These external attributions are highly related to the context within which employees develop attributions. Thus, future research can conduct cross-cultural studies to further investigate whether the effects of external attributions on employee and organisational outcomes vary within and across countries.

Fourth, although HRM system consistency has been framed as an 'organisational climate context' variable in this study, the measurement of this construct stems from prior studies focusing on employees' idiosyncratic perceptions of the HRM systems. As such, HRM system consistency may be closer to a perceptual employee variable, rather than a high-level 'contextual' variable in a more objective way (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Future research, thus, should deploy more objective methods to measure HRM system consistency and other contextual factors which may operate as contingencies affecting the impacts of HRM attributions on employee outcomes. Given the need to contextualise perceived HRM, future research should also investigate how the impacts of HRM attributions vary across organisations, industries, regions and cultures.

Fifth, given the fact that employees are nested in eight firms, it is important to control for organisations. However, I did not conduct a multi-level analysis because the number of firms is obviously too small. Future research can control for the higher nesting of the data to evaluate whether there are systematic differences between the firms in terms of differences in employees' attributions for the HR systems.

Sixth, with the purpose of identifying the impacts of organisational contexts on HRM attributions, I assessed two organisational variables (organisational location and ownership). The correlation results showed that organisational location and ownership did not have a significant influence on HRM attributions. Future research may need to focus on many other organisational variables (e.g., organisational culture and the level of compliance to rules) to contextualise HRM attributions.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This study extends extant literature by establishing an integrative framework connecting different forms of HRM attributions (internal HRM well-being attributions and exploiting attributions, and external Labour Law attributions) and a specific single meta-feature of HRM system strength (consistency) to employee well-being. Drawing on the JDR model, I differentiated internal from external HRM attributions based on their different impacts on employee well-being through thriving at work. My results further indicated that HRM system consistency strengthens the association between internal HRM attributions, rather than external attributions, and employees' thriving at work. Future research should consider other boundary conditions under which the influences of distinct HRM attributions on employee outcomes are maximised.



## **Chapter 5. Conclusion**

There is now growing interest in employee-oriented HRM (Guest, 2017), explaining the link between employees' perceptions of HR systems and employee well-being. This thesis extends the current literature on the perceived HRM–well-being relationship by identifying the antecedents, novel mediators, and moderator in the Chinese context. This thesis comprises three studies. Study One (Chapter Two) is a systematic review study to lay the intellectual foundation for Study Two and Study Three. Study One illuminates that HRM perceptions research has moved into three distinct but inter-connected directions: perceived HRM content (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and HRM attributions (Nishii et al., 2008). Study Two (Chapter Three) demonstrates that employees' perceptions of fair and high-quality benefits schemes (a particular form of perceived HRM content) will mitigate employees' health-related well-being issues (e.g., emotional exhaustion) by improving their job involvement. In addition, Chinese traditionality is an antecedent of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. Study Three (Chapter Four) reveals that HRM attributions are able to influence employee well-being through employees' thriving at work. HRM system consistency is a potential boundary condition for the association between HRM attributions and employee outcomes. This concluding Chapter summarises the research findings, explains key theoretical contributions, and provides several practical implications. Furthermore, limitations of this research are acknowledged. I also propose several ways in which future studies can be pursued and make a number of general conclusions for this thesis.

### **5.1 Research findings**

My thesis seeks to examine how employees' different forms of HRM perceptions (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions) have the potential for exerting impacts on employee well-being in the Chinese context, identifying the mediating role of job-related mindsets (job involvement and thriving at work) and the moderator (HRM system consistency). Data used in this thesis were collected via both pencil-and-paper-based and web-

based questionnaires over two time points (one month apart). The research context is the manufacturing companies across China, including Beijing, Daqing, and Suzhou. Considering the constant call for contextualising HRM research (Cooke 2018; Kaufman 2015) and that China-specific HRM research has developed at a rapid pace, it is necessary to focus on a specific country context (China) to throw light on the role of high-context settings. I studied manufacturing firms located in different cities (both coastal and inland cities) with the purpose of extending extant HRM research in China which focuses mainly on the developed regions and coastal provinces (Cooper et al., 2019). Drawing on various theoretical frameworks (COR theory and JDR model) and rigorous empirical methods (SEM and PROCESS macro tool), six main findings have emerged.

#### **5.1.1 Distinct but inter-related forms of HRM perceptions**

First, existing literature focuses primarily on three differential but inter-connected forms of HRM perceptions: perceived HRM content (the content or “what” of the HR practices), HRM system strength (the process or “how” HR practices are delivered), and HRM attributions (the intent, or “why” HR practices exist) (Ostroff & Bowen 2016). Despite their different theoretical underpinnings, these three dimensions of HRM perceptions may be integrated into a general framework to explain the joint impacts of HRM perceptions on employee well-being outcomes. This is the key focus of Study One.

#### **5.1.2 China traditionality: an individual-level antecedent to HRM perceptions**

Second, it will be beneficial to contextualise HRM perceptions by taking into account a series of contextual cues/antecedents across levels. These include, for instance: cultural settings, economic situations, and political systems at the macro level; business strategies, organisational features, and employment modes at the meso level; and cognitive schemes, demographic factors, and personal values at the micro level. My thesis investigates Chinese traditionality as an

individual-level antecedent because it is highly linked with my research context, China (see Study One). In Study Two, I reveal that as an individual-level cultural trait, Chinese traditionality is positively associated with employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. That is, high-traditional employees are more inclined to consider the benefits schemes as fair and high-quality than their counterparts do. My findings are in line with Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) suggestion that individual employees' HRM perceptions will vary as a function of personal differences (i.e., emotional disposition, personal beliefs, past work experience, and cultural values).

### **5.1.3 A negative relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion**

Third, there is a negative relationship between employees' perceptions of statutory benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion. More specifically, when employees perceive that the contents of statutory benefits schemes (e.g., pension insurance, maternity insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, and housing fund) provided by the employing organisation are fair and high-quality, employees' emotional exhaustion, which is considered as a key aspect of health-related employee well-being, is likely to be at a low level. In effect, employees are able to depend on these valuable benefits resources to deal with both potential and actual challenging circumstances. This is the key finding of Study Two.

### **5.1.4 Job involvement as a mediator in the relationship between perceived benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion**

Fourth, the relationship between employees' perceptions of benefits schemes and emotional exhaustion will be mediated by job involvement. Indeed, when employees are offered abundant objective resources (e.g., benefits schemes), they tend to generate associated energy resources, which can be characterised as a positive dimension of work-related mindsets that contribute to their well-being. This demonstrates that the relationship between benefits schemes (objective resources) and emotional exhaustion may be indirect, because it sparks energy resources (e.g., job

involvement) to mitigate the negative influences of stressful workplace conditions (see Study Two).

#### **5.1.5 Thriving at work as a mediator in the relationship between HRM attributions and employee well-being**

Fifth, HRM attributions will have effects on employee well-being through employees' job-related mindsets (thriving at work). That is to say, the HRM attributions–well-being link can be indirect in the sense that they activate the extrinsic and intrinsic motivational mechanisms. More specifically, internal well-being attributions and Labour Law external attributions will exert a positive influence on employee well-being by increasing employees' thriving-at-work behaviours, while there is a negative relationship between internal exploiting attributions and well-being through reducing employees' thriving at work (see Study Three).

#### **5.1.6 HRM system consistency as a moderator in the relationship between HRM attributions and thriving at work**

Sixth, HRM system consistency, defined as a consistent organisational climate context, is a potential boundary condition for the association between HRM attributions and employee outcomes. To be more specific, HRM system consistency moderates the relationship between internal HRM attributions (HRM well-being attributions and exploiting attributions) and thriving at work. However, the interaction of external HRM attributions (Labour Law attributions) and HRM system consistency does not make a significant impact on thriving at work. In Study Three, I identify whether HRM system consistency functions as a key contingency that influences the effectiveness of HRM attributions in order to emphasise the context-specific nature of HRM perceptions.

### **5.1.7 Overall findings**

By and large, my thesis comprises three studies that demonstrate the relationship between employees' perceptions of HR practices and employee well-being in the Chinese context. Three distinct forms of HRM perceptions (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions) can shape employee well-being through two novel mechanisms/mediators: job involvement (employees' psychological identification with their work) (Lawler & Hall, 1970) and thriving at work (individuals' joint sense of vitality and learning) (Porath et al., 2012) respectively. Furthermore, although HRM attributions and HRM system consistency originate from distinct strands of attribution theories and the stimulus of their perceptions may differ (Hewett et al., 2018), they are inter-related and can be combined into an integral model in accounting for the joint effects of HRM perceptions on employee outcomes (see Study Three). This implies that employees' perceptions of HR practices are to some extent affected by the organisational climate contexts (e.g., HRM system strength). In addition, there is between-person variability in HRM perceptions. For example, I revealed that Chinese traditionality is an individual-level antecedent to employees' perceptions of benefits schemes (perceived HRM content) (see Study Two). This result further explains the context-driven nature of HRM perceptions, which is the key focus of Study One.

## **5.2 Research contributions**

### **5.2.1 Theoretical contributions**

Overall, this thesis unveils the relationship between perceived HRM and employee well-being through comprehensive theoretical frameworks. Specifically, I extended prior perceived HRM research by teasing out the contextual factor (Chinese traditionality), and by incorporating novel mediators (job involvement and thriving at work) and moderator (HRM system consistency) in exploring employee well-being. Four key theoretical contributions will be explained in this section.

#### **5.2.1.1 Theorising the perceived HRM–well-being relationships**

First, this thesis draws upon two different theoretical frameworks (COR and JDR theories) to theorise the link between perceived HRM and employee well-being. Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019) maintained that both COR and JDR theories are the crucial theoretical arguments in the HRM-well-being research. However, relatively less empirical research has adopted these two theories to heed Boxall, Guthrie, and Paaauwe's (2016) call for capturing the role of employee-related mediation variables in the perceived HRM–well-being association. My thesis is innovative in that I emphasise the motivational pathway in order to cast light on the mediating impacts of job-related mindsets (job involvement and thriving at work) to identify employees' hedonic forms of well-being (Spreitzer et al., 2005). The COR model (Hobfoll, 1989) posits that employees tend to build, protect, and retain both *objective* and *energy* resources in the workplaces. The perceived and actual loss of these resources may result in various types of burnout, such as depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion. By mobilising the COR model (Hobfoll, 1989), I claim that the indirect relationship between perceived benefits schemes (*objective* resources) and emotional exhaustion (health-related well-being) operates through job involvement, which could be characterised as a positive form of *energy* resources (Shantz et al., 2016) (see Study Two). Another theoretical perspective utilised in my thesis is the JDR model (Demerouti et al., 2001), suggesting that the interaction of job resources and work demands can shape the overall quality of employee well-being (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). In Study Three, I adopt the *motivational* mechanisms of the JDR model (Demerouti et al., 2001) in explaining how employee well-being is influenced by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational processes. More specifically, positive job-related resources (e.g., HRM well-being attributions and Labour Law attributions) will motivate employees to dedicate their enthusiasm and energies to work (thriving at work), which may contribute to employee well-being. On the contrary, negative job characteristics (e.g., HRM exploiting attributions) are likely to give rise to employees' health issues through impairing employees' progress, learning and vitality (thriving at work). That is, the relationship between perceived HR practices and employee well-being could be indirect, because it activates the motivational

pathways (e.g., job involvement and thriving at work) to reduce the negative influences of stressful working environments (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). My results are in line with Shantz et al.'s (2016) findings that job involvement, characterised as an energy resource, can mediate the link between HRM performance attributions and emotional exhaustion. Identifying the mediating mechanisms is important to theorise the perceived HRM-well-being relationship. As Whetten (1989) eloquently argues, one promising way to make a contribution to theory development is to evaluate the core underlying mechanism that illuminates a certain relationship. Taken together, Study Two and Study Three propose the novel mediators (job involvement and thriving at work), which could allow for a richer theoretical assessment of the motivational processes through which perceived HRM has the potential to contribute to employee well-being.

#### **5.2.1.2 Contextualising HRM perceptions by exploring a China-specific antecedent**

Second, this thesis aims to contextualise employees' HRM perceptions by focusing on a China-specific antecedent of employees' perceptions of benefits schemes, namely Chinese traditionality. The majority of existing studies focus on the outcomes of HRM perceptions, whereas relatively limited attention has been paid to building and testing the framework of HR antecedents (Hewett et al., 2018). This may be a significant research gap for a couple of reasons. First, from the theoretical perspective, the lack of understanding of the contextual variables or antecedents of HRM perceptions may bring challenges for researchers to fully understand the HRM-well-being-performance chain (contextual factors→perceived HRM→employee well-being→individual performance→organisational performance). Second, from the practical perspective, an insufficient knowledge of the antecedents of HRM perceptions could present practical challenges for employers who strive to effectively manage employees' interpretations of HR practices with the hope of enhancing employee well-being. Indeed, Nishii and Wright, in their seminal (2008) study, have proposed that complex contextual variables at multiple levels can drive employees' HRM perceptions. Responding to a recent call for greater sensitivity to the

subtle and powerful contextual cues that influence employees' HRM perceptions (Wang et al., 2020), Study One has identified a number of contextual variables across different levels. These include, for example, Confucian cultural values, business environments, and political systems at the institutional level; organisational backgrounds, firm strategies, and employment modes at the organisational level; leader-member exchange, leadership styles, and interactions among coworkers at the interpersonal level; and past work experience, demographic and cognitive factors at the individual level. It is important to note that these sets of contextual effects may not be exclusive. Rather, they provide a general basis for future studies to be confirmed, refined, and supplemented. Based on rigorous empirical tests, Study Two revealed that the individual-level factor (Chinese traditionality) positively affected perceived benefits schemes. I treat Chinese traditionality as a crucial individual antecedent which can shape employees' perceptions of benefits schemes, as it captures the unique cultural beliefs which may impact employees' attitudes and behaviours in the organisations (He et al., 2016) and it reflects the China-specific context of my research. My thesis reveals that high-traditionality employees tend to interpret benefits schemes at a higher level than low-traditionality ones. This research finding is consistent with previous work, which claims that there is between-person variability in the effectiveness of benefits schemes (Dencker et al., 2007). Moreover, my thesis supports the prevailing argument that employees' HRM perceptions can vary as a function of personal differences (e.g., personal disposition, demographic factors, cultural beliefs, and cognitive variables) (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) (see Study Two). Considering that my research only examines the individual-level antecedent to HRM perceptions, future research can pay special attention to the contextual cues at the organisational and institutional levels. The revelation of contextual settings in HRM perceptions is important in view of the decontextualised trend of HRM research (Kaufman, 2015).

### **5.2.1.3 Contextualising HRM perceptions by distinguishing internal from external HRM attributions**



Third, this thesis advances our understanding of the context-specific nature of HR perceptions by differentiating internal from external Labour Law attributions based on their disparate implications for employee well-being. Echoing past literature, Study Three found that there is a positive association between internal well-being attributions and employee well-being, whereas internal exploiting attributions are negatively related to well-being (Nishii et al., 2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). Contrary to prior research which postulates that external HRM attributions did not significantly impact employee outcomes (Nishii et al., 2008), Study Three revealed that external Labour Law attributions show a significantly positive relationship with employee well-being. The differential findings have theoretical implications for contextualising HRM perceptions. In fact, the majority of previous studies are based on the individualistic context, where employees pay more attention to their individual abilities and motivation, and hence are more cognitively inclined to develop internal HRM attributions rather than external attributions (Nishii et al., 2008). Therefore, it is unsurprising that external attributions are considered to be weakly related to employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Koys, 1991; Sanders et al., 2019). Nevertheless, external attributions may be more salient in the collectivistic context where situational pressures are more paramount, and therefore employees are more predisposed to respond to environmental information (Fletcher & Ward, 1988). That is, the influences of external attributions can vary across contexts, and cross-cultural extensions of HRM perceptions research are particularly valuable (Nishii et al., 2008). In order to contextualise the external HRM attributions in China, Study Three focuses on employees' Labour Law attributions. Study Three acknowledges that when employees perceive that HR practices are executed in order to conform to the external Labour Law, they are likely to believe that management is concerned about employees' occupational health. This particular type of external attribution is associated with the Chinese employment context where labour rights violation (e.g., long working hours, lack of workplace safety precautions, and non-contribution to social insurances) is common (Friedman & Lee, 2010). Prior literature has observed that HRM researchers need to capture contexts in a

more substantial manner (Cooke, 2018; Kaufman, 2015). For instance, scholars should place a high value on human experiences or judgements unique to a cultural context to inform the development of novel theories (Johns, 2006). This thesis adopts the ‘inside out’ approach (Tsui, 2004) to incorporating indigenous Chinese employment elements in the external HRM attributions construct (Labour Law attributions). In other words, the terminology of Chinese Labour Law attributions is considered as a unique source for novel theorising (Whetten, 2009), and holds the potential for inspiring future research on HRM perceptions in the western countries (see Study Three).

#### **5.2.1.4 Contextualising HRM perceptions by examining the potential boundary condition (HRM system consistency)**

Fourth, this thesis addresses Hewett et al.’s (2018) observation that there is a paucity of research which combines two distinct but inter-connected streams of research (HRM attributions and HRM system strength) into one general framework in accounting for the joint impacts of perceived HRM on employee outcomes. This may be a considerable research limitation, considering that synergies between collective-level HRM system strength and individual-level HRM attributions may identify the extent to which individuals’ HRM perceptions will vary across groups, teams, and departments. Indeed, according to Kelley’s attribution theory (1973), individual employees’ HRM attributions are not only based on the internal features of the stimulus per se (e.g., HRM systems) but also the external context of the stimulus (Hewett et al., 2018), such as the organisational climate. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) originally assumed that HRM system strength mediates the HRM-individual/organisational outcomes relationship. Subsequent studies, however, have found that HRM system strength, as an organisational climate construct, will moderate the association between HRM systems and individual/organisational outcomes (e.g., Guan & Frenkel 2019; Sanders et al., 2018). Their findings echo the organisational climate research, presuming that climate strength can amplify the impacts of organisational policies and

practices on individual outcomes (Schneider et al., 2002). Building on this theoretical logical and extant empirical research, Study Three established an integral framework examining the potential boundary condition (HRM system consistency) under which the effects of HRM attributions on thriving at work are maximised. My thesis reveals that the interaction of internal HRM attributions (e.g., HRM well-being and exploiting attributions) and HRM system consistency can have a significant influence on thriving at work. Conversely, HRM system consistency does not moderate the relationship between external HRM attributions (Labour Law attributions) and thriving at work. In other words, the organisational climate context (e.g., HRM system consistency) and external HRM attributions (e.g., Labour Law attributions) could also operate separately to shape employees' thriving at work. This result can lend support to the organisational climate studies by explaining how shared organisational climate may exert impacts on individual employees' HRM attributions and their associated job-related mindsets. In addition, my findings have extended Hewett et al.'s (2018) proposition that two distinct streams of research (HRM attributions and HRM system strength) might be supplementary and work together to have effects on employees' attitudes and behaviours in the workplaces. I argue that HRM perceptions research ought to be contextualised by differentiating forms of HRM attributions (internal vs external) and their divergent interactions with organisational climate contexts (i.e., HRM system consistency) on employees (see Study Three). More attention should be paid to important variables related to the organisational context, such as firm ownership, organisational size, organisational culture, and the level of compliance to rules.

### **5.2.2 Practical implications**

The results of my research have four practical implications. In contemporary workplaces, employees are faced with multitudes of challenges (e.g., intensive workloads, employment insecurity, and job stress) (Cooper et al., 2019), which have significantly hampered employee well-being. In this regard, managers should deploy various practices to address the workplace

challenges. Managers, for instance, ought to motivate employees to develop positive job-related mindsets and establish an employee-friendly workplace culture for the purpose of effectively managing employee-being. Given the fact that employees are likely to develop different attributions for the same HR practices based on their cognitive schemas and cultural beliefs, managers also need to use differing communications tools to deliver the employee-oriented intentions behind these HR practices to employees.

#### **5.2.2.1 Managing employee well-being in the workplace**

First, managers need to understand that managing the well-being of the workforce is an important part of HRM for responsible organisations. It is widely acknowledged that managers should improve the joint-optimisation of firm performance and employee well-being rather than give priority to organisational effectiveness at the expense of employee health (Jo et al., 2020). In the Chinese manufacturing industry, which is characterised by challenging workplace conditions, such as extensive job-related demands and relatively low salaries (Guan & Frenkel, 2019), employees are more likely to suffer from a higher level of burnout. An effective method to promote employee well-being and retain talented employees in the manufacturing industry is to implement well-being-oriented HR practices. Guest (2017) conceptualised a bundle of well-being-oriented HR practices, including investment in employees (e.g., recruitment, training and career support), providing engaging work (e.g., job autonomy and skill utilisation), positive social and physical environment (e.g., prioritising employee health and employment security), voice (e.g., collective representation), and organisational support (e.g., supportive and participative management). Recent research has revealed that these well-being-oriented HR practices could hold the potential for fostering workplace mutuality (Cooper et al., 2019). Considering that some front-line supervisors may not fully control the broad HRM system at the organisation level, they may actively engage in health-promoting leadership practices to establish a healthy workplace environment. Several critical components of health-promoting leadership include low workload,

control, community, fairness, and value-fit (Jiménez, Winkler, & Dunkl, 2017). These components can work together to help front-line supervisors act as role models and maintain a trusting relationship with their employees. In fact, prior work has revealed that when employees perceive manager/supervisor trustworthiness (relationship-related well-being), they are more likely to enjoy enhanced job satisfaction (happiness-related well-being) (Min, Zhu, & Bambaca, 2020).

#### **5.2.2.2 Motivating employees to develop positive job-related mindsets**

Second, given that the provision of high-quality well-being-oriented HR practices or health-promoting leadership may represent a high-cost investment for organisations, managers across levels should deploy other relatively economical strategies to protect and promote employee well-being. My findings demonstrated that positive job-related mindsets, such as job involvement and thriving at work, could play a significant role in the association between HRM perceptions and employee well-being. These positive feelings are expected to be beneficial to managing work demands, reducing workplace pressures, and mitigating health-related problems (e.g., emotional exhaustion, fatigue and job strain). Accordingly, managers are advised to help their employees stimulate a positive job-related state of minds (e.g., vigour, dedication and absorption) by providing clear and prompt feedback, and encouraging employees to possess a variety of skills and actively participate in the decision-making process (Brown, 1996). These practices are highly relevant for innovation-oriented companies that encourage technology innovation, an organisational strategy which requires their employees to become more knowledgeable, committed, and thriving. In addition, the recent governmental innovation initiatives, such as ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’, emphasise employees’ positive dedication to technical upgrading and creative learning. In this sense, managers need to ensure that their workforce will develop a psychological identification with their job, remain energetic and optimistic at work, and actively engage in learning at the workplace. It is worth noting that the goal of motivating the

workforce to develop positive job-related mindsets may not be accomplished in the short run. For this reason, managers ought to contribute to the establishment of a learning-friendly workplace culture in a sustainable manner.

### **5.2.2.3 Creating an employee-friendly workplace climate**

Third, my study reveals that a consistent HRM system, as an employee-friendly workplace climate, can increase the level of employees' thriving at work and improve employee well-being. A consistent HRM system consists of three elements (instrumentality, validity, and consistent HRM messages), which can underscore the communicative processes between managers and employees, and simultaneously highlight employees' concerns and interests (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). By contrast, inconsistent HRM system represents a weak situation where HR messages are conveyed to employees in an ambiguous fashion. Double-bind communications will inevitably result in employees' cognitive confusion and job dissatisfaction (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). As such, it is imperative for management across levels (e.g., front-line managers, middle managers, HR managers, and top managers) to articulate, communicate, and implement HR policies in a consistent manner. The consistency of HR messages and initiatives will enable employees to gain a more nuanced understanding of organisational legitimacy and procedures, align their individual roles with organisational goals, and act in an appropriate way (Li et al., 2012). In challenging and stressful workplaces, especially in the manufacturing industry, managers are encouraged to foster mutuality by clarifying what is rewarded, appreciated and valued by organisations, and motivating employees to develop an accurate perception of the consistent HRM system. Specifically, managers are advised to deliver consistent HRM messages to employees over time and across contexts (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Li et al., 2012). For example, managers need to make sure that the HR practices are stable for a long period of time. In addition, the different dimensions of HR practices should reinforce each other and fit together with the broad business strategies.

#### **5.2.2.4 Deploying different communication methods based on employees' idiosyncratic HRM perceptions**

Fourth, my results illuminate that employees tend to make attributions of the same HR practices that are distinct according to their cultural beliefs and personal values: thus, employees high in traditionality are more inclined to consider employee benefits schemes as equal and high-quality than their counterparts who do not value traditionality highly. Indeed, it is possible that some employees understand that HR practices are implemented in order to exploit employees whereas others attribute that the same HR practices are in place with the purpose of promoting employee well-being (Nishii et al., 2008). Hence, it is necessary for managers to be aware of employees' idiosyncratic attributions of HRM and deploy different communication styles to elucidate the intentions of HR practices to different employees. For instance, managers may tailor official and direct communication tools (e.g., regular conferences and formal meetings) to deliver the employee-oriented intentions of HRM to high-traditionality employees, as traditionalists are likely to show obedience to their leaders (Yang et al., 1989). By contrast, managers are advised to adopt informal communications methods (i.e., private discussions and afterwork parties) to send HRM messages in more details to low-traditionality employees, who are likely to challenge authority and organisational hierarchy (He et al., 2016). In this way, employees are able to understand that managers understand employees' unique needs and demands, take care of employee well-being, and support employee development.

### **5.3 Research limitations and directions for future research**

This research has four main limitations. First, my thesis only examines one particular form of external attributions (Labour Law attributions) in one specific country (China), while not focusing on the importance of many other external HRM attributions across contexts. Second, this thesis only focuses on employees' perceptions of HR practices, while ignoring other well-designed management practices (e.g., leadership behaviours) which can also contribute to employee well-being. Third, this research pays attention to psychological components of

employee well-being. However, employees' objective health remains under-researched. Fourth, my thesis also has some methodological limitations. I propose several future research avenues to address these limitations.

### **5.3.1 Focusing on a wide range of other external HRM attributions across contexts**

First, although my research highlights the importance of external HRM attributions, I only focus on one particular form of external attributions (Labour Law attributions) in one country (China). In effect, there are a variety of other external HRM attributions, which are highly related to the situational environment within which employees develop their perceptions. For instance, employees are inclined to believe that the actual intention of the HR practices is to imitate their competitors in the domestic or international market. Or employees are likely to understand that the organisational intention behind the implemented HR practices (e.g., working from home, telecommunications, and virtual teams) is to meet the demands of information technology in the COVID-19 crisis. Accordingly, future research can pay special attention to the context-driven attributions which reflect the current situation where their companies are operating. In addition, given that employees' HR attributions and perceptions may be based on the national values of cultures (Farndale & Sanders, 2017), future research should conduct cross-cultural studies to further investigate whether the effects of different forms of external attributions vary within and across contexts. Future studies, for example, can investigate whether Labour Law attributions will still make a positive impact on employee well-being in highly regulated countries (e.g., the Netherlands and Germany) where many, if not most, aspects of well-being-oriented HR practices have been highly institutionalised (Kim & Wright, 2010). These comparative studies can cast light on the role of culture in HRM perceptions research.



### **5.3.2 Further exploring other managerial practices to promote well-being**

Second, my research indicates that HR practices can contribute to employee well-being by enhancing employees' positive motivational states, such as job involvement and thriving at work. However, the well-being effects I identified could be attributable not only to HR practices, but also to other well-designed management practices (i.e., in the form of supportive and service-oriented leadership behaviours). In fact, managers who are concerned about employee well-being are inclined to establish employee-friendly workplace cultures and provide high-quality service for employees, which may foster employees' psychological health (Jo et al., 2020). Conversely, managers who tend to exert strict control over employees or ridicule their subordinates (abusive leadership) may impair employees' psychological and physical health (Liang, Hanig, Evans, Brown, & Lian, 2018). According to the labour process theory, leadership behaviours may be regarded as managerial apparatuses for monitoring employees and reducing labour costs, which in turn can intensify employees' workloads, and increase potential risks to health-related issues, including anxiety, depression and job stress (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). Although these two areas (HR practices and leadership behaviours) are both associated with employee well-being, they have been explored in a separate manner (Jo et al., 2020). Future research, hence, should extend my conceptual models by identifying the interactions of HR practices and leadership behaviours as two contextual antecedents to influence employee well-being.

### **5.3.3 Paying closer attention to objective components of employee well-being**

Third, well-being in this thesis is mainly measured by health-related components validated by Kilroy et al.'s (2017) study and happiness-related components verified by Alfes et al. (2012), while relationship-related components of well-being remain unexplored. Recent literature has observed that employee well-being is a multi-dimensional construct composed of three distinct aspects (Guerci, Hauff & Gilardi, 2019). The first aspect is health-related well-being, referring to the overall quality of both physical and mental health, such as physiological issues, job stress, and

emotional exhaustion (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019). The second aspect is happiness-related well-being, capturing employees' subjective experiences and attitudes at work, such as work engagement, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). The third aspect is relational-related well-being, identifying the overall quality of employees' relationships with their supervisors, co-workers and communities, including trust, social integration, and leader-member exchange (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007). These components may not be interchangeable, as each of them focuses on a specific characteristic of the broad construct of well-being (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). In other words, HR practices are likely to exert positive impacts on one component of employee well-being, while negatively influencing others (Guerci et al., 2019). Therefore, future research ought to consider well-being as a holistic concept which manifests itself in various dimensions. More specifically, future studies may expand the scope of employee well-being by theorising the distinct associations between employee perceptions of HR practices and differentiated forms of employee well-being. Considering that HRM scholars pay close attention to mental well-being (e.g., work engagement, psychosomatic problems, fatigue and anxiety), future research may utilise objective measurements to capture employees' physical and physiological well-being, such as cardiovascular conditions, backache, and stomach ache.

#### **5.3.4 More longitudinal qualitative research**

Fourth, there are some methodological limitations in my research. Although my data were gathered at two points in time, the data of independent variables and mediators (perceived benefits schemes and job involvement in Study Two; HRM attributions and thriving at work at Study Three) were collected at the same time point. Hence, CMB cannot be completely ruled out. In addition, this quantitative research is based on a single-level research design and single-source (rated by employees) data, which might influence the reliability and validity of my research findings. I therefore suggest future research should consider using more rigorous methods in order

to identify the causal relationships between HR perceptions and employee well-being outcomes. In terms of the analytic framework, I encourage future research to deploy a multi-level analytic framework to unpack the black box in the HRM-performance causal chain across levels (for a review, see Jiang, Takeuchi & Lepak, 2013). The underlying logic behind this framework suggests that HR strategies implemented at the organisational level will be first experienced and interpreted by individual employees. It is the employee perceptions of HR practices that are closely associated with employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (e.g., abilities, motivation, and knowledge), which, in the collective, can lead to desired organisational outcomes (e.g., Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009; Jiang, Hu, Liu & Lepak, 2017). In terms of the source for collecting data, there has been a significant methodological shift away from management to employee reports of HR practices (Beijer et al., 2019). Future HRM research may benefit by adopting the multiple-source data to capture the distinctions between management-based and employee-based evaluations of HR practices. Moreover, in terms of research methods, future studies should integrate quantitative (e.g., longitudinal surveys and quasi-experimental design) and qualitative methods (e.g., longitudinal case study, interviews, and ethnographic methods) to improve the reliability and validity of research results (Creswell, 2013).

#### **5.4 Concluding remarks**

This thesis comprises three studies (one review study and two empirical studies), seeking to illuminate the relationship between employee perceptions of HR practices and employee well-being in the Chinese context. Data were collected utilising both pencil-and-paper-based and web-based questionnaires from eight Chinese manufacturing firms. Based on two key theoretical perspectives (the COR framework and the JDR model) and rigorous research methods (SEM and SEM and PROCESS macro tool), this thesis yielded a set of important findings. First, Chinese traditionality, which is described as an individual-level cultural trait rooted in the traditional Chinese society, is positively associated with employees' perceptions of benefits schemes. Exploring the antecedent to HRM perceptions is valuable considering the context-specific nature

of HRM perceptions. Second, HRM perceptions can exert influences on employee well-being through two novel job-related mechanisms/mediators: job involvement and thriving at work. Third, despite their different theoretical underpinnings, three dimensions of HRM perceptions (perceived HRM content, HRM system strength, and HRM attributions) can be combined into a general framework to explain the joint impacts of HRM perceptions on employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Fourth, HRM system consistency, which is considered to be a consistent organisational climate, is an important boundary condition for the relationship between HRM attributions and employees' thriving at work.

Overall, this thesis is innovative in that it establishes an integrative framework incorporating an individual-level contextual factor (Chinese traditionality), novel mediators (job involvement and thriving at work) and moderator (HRM system consistency) to elucidate the HRM-well-being causal chain. It is worth noting that there are several limitations in my thesis. For example, my research only focuses on one particular type of external HRM attributions (Labour Law attributions) in one country (China) to capture the context-specific nature of HRM perceptions. Future research, therefore, should examine how the impacts of HRM perceptions on employee well-being vary across countries and contexts, and address many other external HRM attributions which are associated with the contextual environment where employees form their perceptions.

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### Appendix A: A summary of perceived HRM studies analysed in Study One

Year	Author	Context	Method	Antecedent	Mediator	Moderator	Outcome
<b>1. Perceived HRM content (N=14)</b>							
2009	Lam, Chen, & Takeuchi	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived retention-oriented compensation</li> <li>• Perceived formalised training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational citizenship</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intention to leave</li> </ul>
2011	Fu & Kamenou	China	Qual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese cultural values</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee perceptions of HR practices</li> </ul>
2011	Shen & Zhu	China	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived socially responsible HRM</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affective commitment</li> <li>• Continuance commitment</li> <li>• Normative commitment</li> </ul>
2012	Ma & Trigo	China	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multinational corporations from different national backgrounds</li> <li>• (Employees' perceptions toward the HRM approaches)</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HRM approaches</li> <li>• (Turnover intention)</li> </ul>
2014	Shen & Leggett	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived best HR practices</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Household registration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived organisational justice</li> </ul>
2015	McPhail & McNulty	Multiple countries (including China)	Qual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort factor (social norms of the local culture)</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender expatriates' perceptions of HRM's duty</li> </ul>
2016	Ma et al.	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ownership type</li> <li>• (Perceptions of the commitment HR practices in MNCs in China)</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of the control and commitment HR practices</li> <li>• Job satisfaction</li> <li>• (Turnover intention)</li> </ul>



				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Perceptions of the control HR practices in domestic firms in China)</li> </ul>			
2017	Li & Frenkel	China	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervisor perceptions of HR practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader-member exchange</li> <li>• (Employee perceptions of HR practices)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervisor-subordinate hukou status similarity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader-members exchange</li> <li>• Employee perceptions of HR practices</li> <li>• (Work engagement)</li> </ul>
2017	Li et al.	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived reward for creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity-related intrinsic motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge appraisal</li> <li>• Threat appraisal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative performance</li> </ul>
2017	Liu et al.	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee-experienced performance-oriented HR systems</li> <li>• (Aggregate employee creativity)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee-experienced maintenance-oriented HR systems</li> <li>• (Firm ownership)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee domain-relevant skills</li> <li>• Employee creativity</li> <li>• (Firm innovation)</li> </ul>
2017	Jiang et al.	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers' HR perceptions</li> <li>• Coworkers' HR perceptions</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissimilarity to manager</li> <li>• Dissimilarity to coworkers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee-perceived HR perceptions</li> </ul>
2019	Ali et al.	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implemented HPWS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective human capital</li> <li>• Employee-perceived HPWS</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unit performance</li> </ul>
2019	Guan & Frenkel	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee perceived HR practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work engagement</li> <li>• Job crafting</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task performance</li> <li>• OCB</li> </ul>

2019	Li, Rees, & Branine	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employees' perceptions of HRM (e.g. training and development, reward management and performance management)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee commitment</li> <li>Turnover intention</li> </ul>
<b>2. HRM system strength (N=8)</b>						
2011	Li, Frenkel, & Sanders	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HRM system features (distinctiveness, consistency, consensus)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HPWS climate strength</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee attitudes: work satisfaction, vigour, intention to quit</li> </ul>
2012	Frenkel, Li, & Restubog	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HR strength (distinctiveness, consistency, consensus)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributive justice</li> <li>Procedural justice</li> <li>Interactional justice</li> <li>Negative emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotional exhaustion</li> </ul>
2012	Li, Sanders, & Frenkel	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leader-member exchange</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HRM consistency</li> <li>Job performance</li> </ul>
2018	Jia et al.	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incongruence between transactional and transformational leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hierarchical culture</li> <li>HRM system strength (distinctiveness, consistency, consensus)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fellowship behaviour</li> </ul>
2018	Sanders et al.,	Ten countries (including China)	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance-based rewards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HR strength</li> <li>Uncertainty avoidance of a country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Innovative behaviour</li> </ul>
2019	Guan & Frenkel	China	Quant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived of training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HRM system strength</li> <li>Task performance</li> </ul>

						(distinctiveness, consistency, consensus)	• Organisational citizenship behaviour
2019	Yan et al.	China	Quant	• Perceived high commitment organisation	• Taking charge behaviours	• Perceived strength of the HRM system	• In-role job performance
2020	Jia et al.	China	Quant	• Job embeddedness • The perceived strength of HRM system		• Empowering leadership	• Proactive work behaviours
3. HRM attributions (N=3)							
2014	Chen & Wang	China	Mixed	• Commitment-focused and • Control-focused attributions	• Perceived organisational support		• Turnover intention • Task performance
2019	Sanders, Yang, & Li	Australia China	Quant	• Perceptions of HPWS		• Power distance orientation	• Quality-enhancement attribution • Cost-reduction attribution
2020	Lee et al.	China	Quant	• Employee well-being HRM attribution		• Task idiosyncratic deals	• External job change intention • Internal job change intention

## **Appendix B: Measures used in Study Two**

### ***Chinese traditionality***

1. The best way to avoid mistakes is to follow the instructions of senior people.
2. When people are in dispute, they ought to ask the most senior person to decide who is right.
3. The chief government official is like the head of a household, the citizen should obey his decisions on all state matters.
4. Before marriage, a woman should subordinate herself to her father; after marriage, to her husband.

### ***Perceived benefits schemes***

1. In our organisation, the pension insurance is fair and high in quality.
2. In our organisation, the medical insurance is unfair and low in quality. (R)
3. In our organisation, the unemployment insurance is fair and high in quality.
4. In our organisation, the work-related injury insurance is fair and high in quality.
5. In our organisation, the maternity insurance is unfair and low in quality.
6. In our organisation, the housing fund is fair and high in quality.

### ***Job involvement***

1. The most important things that happen to me involve my present job.
2. I live, eat and breathe my job.
3. Most of my interests are centred around my job.
4. I have very strong ties with my present job, which would be very difficult to break.
5. Most of my personal life goals are job-oriented.
6. I consider my job to be central to my existence.

***Emotional exhaustion***

1. I feel emotionally drained from my work.
2. I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
3. I feel burned out from my work.
4. I feel used up at the end of the workday.
5. Working all day is really a strain for me.

## **Appendix C: Measures used in Study Three**

### ***HRM well-being attributions***

1. This organisation provides employees with training and development to promote employee well-being.
2. The benefits and rewards system in this organisation is designed to promote employee well-being.
3. The staffing and selection system in this organisation is designed to promote employee well-being.
4. The performance appraisal system in this organisation is designed to promote employee well-being.
5. The scheduling system (e.g., employee participation, work hours, leave policies) is designed to promote employee well-being.

### ***HRM exploiting attributions***

1. This organisation provides employees with training and development to exploit employees.
2. The benefits and rewards system in this organisation is designed to exploit employees.
3. The staffing and selection system in this organisation is designed to exploit employees.
4. The performance appraisal system in this organisation is designed to exploit employees.
5. The scheduling system (e.g., employee participation, work hours, leave policies) is designed to exploit employees.

### ***Labour Law attributions***

1. This organisation provides employees with training and development to comply with the Labour Law.
2. The benefits and rewards system in this organisation is designed to comply with the Labour Law.

3. The staffing and selection system in this organisation is designed to comply with the Labour Law.
4. The performance appraisal system in this organisation is designed to comply with the Labour Law.
5. The scheduling system (e.g., employee participation, work hours, leave policies) is designed to comply with the Labour Law.

### ***HRM system consistency***

1. The HR practices in this organisation do not contribute to employees' motivation. (R)
2. The HR practices implemented in this organisation sound good in theory, but do not function in practice. (R)
3. The appraisal procedure developed by the HR department, has in practice other effects than the intended effects. (R)
4. The HR department does not succeed in actively changing employees' behaviour. (R)
5. There is a wide gap between intended and actual effects of HR initiatives. (R)
6. In this organisation, HR policy changes every other minute. (R)
7. The various HR initiatives send inconsistent signals. (R)
8. The successive initiatives introduced by the HR department often clash badly. (R)
9. In our organisation, there is clear consistency of between words and deeds of the HR department.

### ***Thriving at work***

1. At work, I find myself learning often.
2. At work, I continue to learn more as time goes by.
3. At work, I see myself continually improving.
4. At work, I am not learning (R).

5. At work, I am developing a lot as a person.
6. At work, I feel alive and viral.
7. At work, I do not feel very energetic (R).
8. At work, I feel alert and awake.
9. At work, I have energy and spirit.
10. At work, I am looking forward to each new day.

***Employee wellbeing***

1. I don't lose sleep over work-related issues.
2. I have confidence in myself.
3. I can cope with work problems.
4. I enjoy my usual work activities.
5. I can concentrate on what I have to do at work.