

4.3. Management in China as reflected by academic research (Sára Koczkás)

4.3.1. Introduction

In recent decades, scholarly literature on Chinese management has gained significant traction (W. Liu et al., 2022). Both empirical studies (e.g., Liu et al., 2017; Ren et al., 2021; Vaszkun et al., 2022; Vaszkun & Saito, 2022) and theoretical contributions (e.g., Chuang et al., 2015; Li, 2014) have increased in volume, reflecting a growing academic interest in China as a unique management context. Chinese management has now solidified itself as a distinct research field, supported by specialized journals such as *Management and Organization Review* and *Chinese Management Studies*. Alongside China's rise as a global economic power and key player in international trade, the academic community has increasingly focused on understanding its managerial practices. This has sparked discussions on how to best approach research in the context of this developing country, which presents a distinctive external environment for organizations (Child, 2009). While some research adopts a geographically neutral lens, treating Chinese management as part of broader global trends (Kong et al., 2020), others advocate for more context-specific theories and variables tailored to China's unique environment (Jing & Van de Ven, 2014).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the current trends of Chinese management research and explore the areas being addressed in empirical research recently. Historically, Chinese management has been heavily influenced by cultural and philosophical principles, particularly Confucianism, which stresses hierarchy, collectivism, and respect for authority. These cultural values have significantly shaped managerial behaviour, impacting leadership approaches, decision-making, and organizational dynamics in Chinese companies. The same has been shown by Vaszkun (2013) regarding Japanese companies. However, with China's rise as a global economic leader, modern factors like sustainability, innovation, and talent management have also become integral to its management practices. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the unique contextual influencing factors of Chinese management based on the theoretical foundations of contingency theory and the results of empirical research published since 2017.

The study is structured as follows. The next chapter introduces the most important environmental and contextual factors which influence Chinese organizations and

Chinese management practices. Then, based on recent literature, the paper provides an overview on the most recent topics covered in the literature of Chinese management which can be relevant for international management scholars.

4.3.2. Environmental factors affecting the Chinese organizations

Traditionally, three institutional factors shape the uniqueness of the Chinese business environment: politics, economy, and cultural values. China has a long history of centralized power, acceptance of inequality, and a preference for order and rigid structures, and it remains governed by a one-party system. Despite the significant economic transformation following the country's opening up in 1978, which shifted from a centralized, socialist economy to a market-oriented system, modern China is still a transitional economy, guided by five-year plans. The value system promoted by the state is deeply influenced by Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes respect for authority and self-sacrifice for the sake of social order (J. B. Feng et al., 2019). The Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist ideologies has led to a unique value system (Froese et al., 2019). China's distinctive cultural traits have been underscored in various value surveys, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1984), the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004), or the model of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012).

While these institutional factors continue to explain certain unique organizational phenomena in China, it is important to consider the country's recent challenges, as well. These issues, although part of global trends, are also a result of China's rapid and less sustainable economic growth, driven by its distinctive cultural context and the governance of the Communist Party. Three main aspects can be identified from recent literature: sustainable growth, transition towards an innovation-oriented economy, and societal changes leading to HR challenges.

Striving for sustainable growth

Although China is the world's second-largest economy by nominal GDP, many regions remain underdeveloped, with millions still living in poverty, leading to significant regional inequalities. The country's rapid economic growth, industrialization, and technological advancements have also severely impacted the environment, making China one of the largest global polluters. Consequently, key objectives for the Chinese economy include reducing poverty and regional disparities, promoting green energy, and addressing air,

water, and soil pollution. Ensuring a sustainable, environmentally friendly approach to economic growth while mitigating climate change remains a central focus for China moving forward (World Bank Group, 2022).

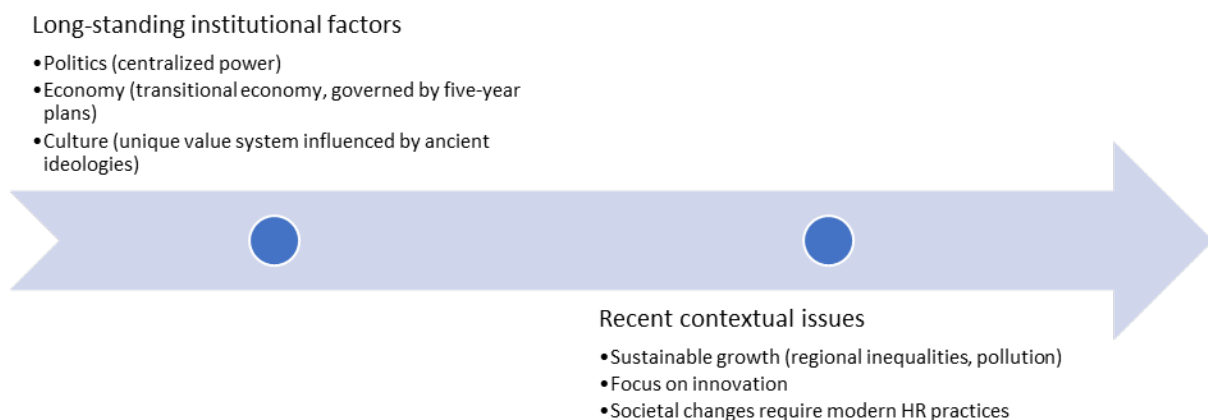
Transition to an innovation-oriented economy

Innovation is a powerful tool for addressing challenges such as pollution and inequality (World Bank Group, 2019). By promoting innovation, China can enhance its global competitiveness, transition toward an innovation-driven economy, and increase incomes, shifting from the "made in China" model to one of "innovated in China" (S.-J. Wei et al., 2017). Government support plays a critical role in these developments—while technological innovations benefit from regulatory backing, the rapidly changing and less transparent regulatory environment poses challenges (Froese et al., 2019).

HR challenges caused by societal changes

The aging of Chinese society presents unprecedented challenges for businesses in managing a workforce with diverse age groups (Glinskaya & Feng, 2018). As foreign companies become more prevalent in China, modern HR practices have grown increasingly attractive to Chinese employees. In the shift from capital-driven to talent-oriented companies, attracting and retaining talent has become a major challenge, particularly given the high turnover rates. To retain talented employees, salary increases alone are not enough—they also seek career growth opportunities, training, and greater autonomy (Froese et al., 2019).

Figure 1. Summary of the contextual factors of Chinese management



4.3.3. Empirical insights from the Chinese management literature

The political and cultural environment has traditionally been seen as a key determinant of Chinese organizations' operations. However, while this may still hold true, the literature since 2017 has increasingly shifted its focus toward more recent economic priorities and social and environmental issues, such as China's transition to a globally competitive, innovation-driven economy based on sustainable, green growth. Among the institutional factors—political and economic systems and cultural values—the latter two have seen limited representation in recent empirical studies, and even politics appears underrepresented. This suggests that these factors may have already been extensively explored, with recent management research emphasizing current challenges in China's economy, particularly in areas like innovation (H. Zhang et al., 2017), sustainability (M. X. Yang et al., 2019), and HRM issues (Zhang et al., 2020). In the following, the most recent research trends of Chinese management will be summarized based on the main dimensions of contingency theory (Vaszkun & Koczkás, 2024).

In the *external environment* of Chinese organizations, the dominating topics are the features of industrial environments, market uncertainty, environmental and political issues and the role of other stakeholders. In the industrial environment, one of the most important factors is the level of competition within the industry, typically measured by market share (Lin et al., 2019) and sometimes by managerial or employee perceptions of competitive pressure (Dai et al., 2018). Market uncertainty generally stems from various stakeholders, including demand and supply fluctuations, as well as technological changes. Supply and demand uncertainty, a key factor affecting organizations, is frequently discussed in the literature (Hou et al., 2019). Given that innovation and technological advancement are national priorities, these elements play a significant role in recent studies on organizational contingencies (Hu et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2021). Environmental issues are also a prominent theme in research, explored from multiple perspectives, including industry characteristics (Jiang et al., 2020), political pressures or (J. Zhang et al., 2020), customer demand (Dai et al., 2018), and the regulatory landscape (S. Wang et al., 2018). Various stakeholders are examined as well, with particular

attention given to political bodies—assessing the support perceived or received—and supplier relationships, such as the quality of supplier partnerships (Shu et al., 2020; W. Yang et al., 2017).

The majority of topics in the *intra-organizational context* dimension can be categorized into four main themes. *Leadership attributes* includes factors such as gender diversity in top management, as well as the educational and professional backgrounds of senior leaders, including their foreign experience and social networks (He & Jiang, 2019). The topic of *firm-level abilities and capabilities* mostly assesses a firm's financial capacity to implement specific strategies and functions (Zou et al., 2019). Other key areas of research here are knowledge, innovation and the protection of the environment (D. Yang et al., 2019). The theme focusing on *organizational members' abilities and capabilities* focuses on employee characteristics, such as educational attainment, professional background (e.g., tenure and work experience) (Le & Lei, 2017; Shahab et al., 2018) and relevant skills, including both job-specific and interpersonal competencies (Zhao & Xia, 2017). The topic of *ownership structure* primarily distinguishes between family-owned, state-owned and foreign owned enterprises and joint-ventures (Xu et al., 2019; Ye & Li, 2021).

One of the largest sets of factors in the dimension of *organizational behaviour* focuses on *individuals within organizations*, grouped into two main themes: employee abilities (Cai & Du, 2017; Cooke et al., 2019) and employee behaviour (Huang et al., 2018; Wattoo et al., 2020). The latter makes up the majority of this category, encompassing aspects related to work performance and general workplace conduct, including motivation, interpersonal dynamics, and emotional responses. *Organizational culture*-related aspects appear with similar frequency to those related to individuals. These include the dynamics between supervisors and employees, as well as peer-to-peer interactions (Chong et al., 2018; P. Liu & Shi, 2017). Additionally, shared values and attitudes toward innovation, change, and knowledge sharing are emphasized (Le et al., 2020; Song, 2020). Leadership behaviour assessments are often based on employee perceptions of their leaders' abilities, actions, and leadership styles (Newman et al., 2019) or self-

assessments from top management members regarding their own leadership capabilities and behaviours (Khan et al., 2020). *HRM-related factors* include employees' perceptions of HR practices (Chen et al., 2018; G. Tang et al., 2017) as well as the management's intentions regarding human resource strategies, such as reward systems, training, performance evaluations, appraisals, work scheduling, and career development opportunities (Ma et al., 2017; Z. Wang & Xu, 2017).

Firm performance is assessed using both financial and non-financial metrics. Financial measures often include profit, sales, return on assets and investments, market share, cash flow, overall efficiency, and growth rates, which can be evaluated objectively (through clear, quantifiable data) (H. Zhang et al., 2017), subjectively (based on managerial perception) (L.-Q. Wei et al., 2021), or relatively (compared to competitors) (M. Feng et al., 2018). Non-financial metrics focus on employee performance (Tang et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2021), such as quality of work, task performance, punctuality, effectiveness, and efficiency, often rated by supervisors—highlighting the growing significance of employees within organizations. Performance-related measures are typically used as dependent outcomes, indicating that they are primarily applied to assess the impact of other dimensions or factors within the organization.

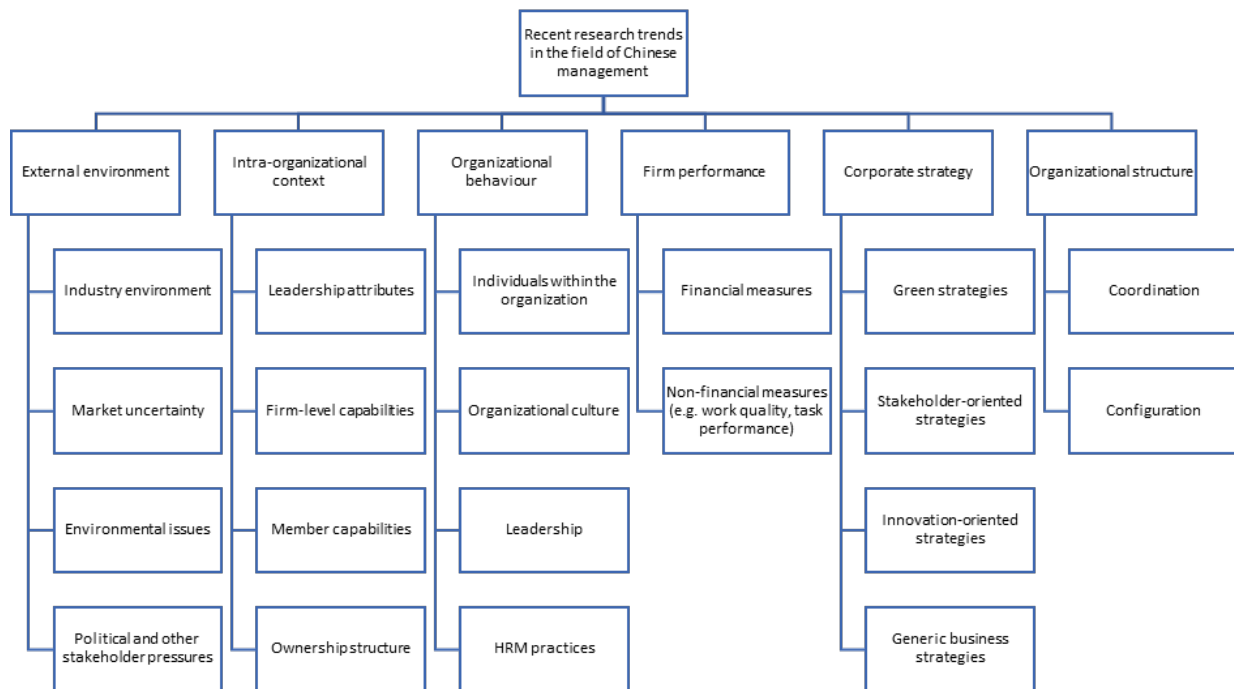
Corporate strategy factors can be grouped into four main categories. *Green strategies* focus on sustainable management practices, such as reducing energy and material consumption, and disclosing environmental data (Shahab et al., 2020), along with sustainability-driven innovations like R&D investments in eco-friendly technologies and the number of green patents (Song et al., 2019), reflecting the organization's core strategic direction. *Stakeholder-oriented strategies* are another prominent focus (Choi et al., 2019), particularly in the context of CSR initiatives. These include engaging local communities, addressing stakeholder interests, and implementing fair business practices. *Innovation as a strategic focus* is also a key area in empirical research (Zhou et al., 2019), primarily centred on technological advancements and R&D investments in product and process development. Lastly, a significant body of research explores *generic business strategies*, with an increasing emphasis on differentiation strategies, though low-cost approaches are still represented in the literature.

The dimension or *organizational structure* primarily focuses on aspects of coordination, such as communication between different functional departments (Yu et al., 2019), and configuration, including organizational structures and decision-making processes (Hughes et al., 2019). This area is not only underrepresented in the literature, but the factors are highly diverse, lacking clear, distinguishable groups. This further reinforces the idea that HR and strategy are the most prominent areas in current organizational practices and research. With foreign companies and HR practices gaining popularity, alongside the evolving growth pattern of the Chinese economy, these management areas have become the dominant focus in the field.

4.3.4. Conclusion

Recent research in Chinese management has shifted focus from traditional determinants, such as the political and cultural environment, to contemporary economic priorities and pressing social and environmental issues. While the political and cultural factors have historically influenced organizational operations, recent studies have revealed a limited representation of these aspects. Instead, there is a growing emphasis on China's transition to an innovation-driven economy that prioritizes sustainable growth, with significant attention given to innovation, sustainability, and human resource management. Figure 2 summarizes the main areas of recent research in Chinese management, which provide a solid starting point when analysing Chinese businesses from an international management perspective.

Figure 2. Recent research directions in Chinese management



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