International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 34 (June 2026) PP. 280-291

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (IJEMP)
www.gaexcellence.com/ijemp

HYBRIDISING EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION IN EMERGING ECONOMIES: A SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES (SEZ)–CULTURE–TECHNOLOGY FRAMEWORK IN CHINA

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Article Info:

Article history:
Received date: 01.04.2026
Revised date: 27.04.2026
Accepted date: 17.05.2026
Published date: 15.06.2026

To cite this document:

Wang, Y., Parasuraman, B., & Yajid, A. A. (2026). Hybridising Employee Participation in Emerging Economies: A Special Economic Zones (Sez)–Culture–Technology Framework in China. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices, 9*(34), 280-291.

Abstract:

This study examines the evolution and localisation of employee participation (EP) in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in China, focusing on the interplay of institutional adaptation, cultural buffering, and technical participation competence. Using a qualitative multi-case design involving six private enterprises from manufacturing, technology, and service sectors, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and non-participant observation. The findings reveal three dominant participation forms—institutionalised, technology-enabled, and culturally embedded—and identify distinct archetypes that reflect differences in ownership structure, industry context, and technological readiness. The analysis demonstrates that cultural norms mediate the effectiveness of formal EP mechanisms, while employees' digital skills significantly influence participation depth in Industry 4.0 contexts. The study advances EP theory by integrating cultural and technological dimensions into institutional frameworks and offers practical insights for managers and policymakers seeking to design contextually appropriate participation strategies in emerging economies.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.934017 **Keyword:**

Cultural Buffering, Employee Participation, Participation Competence, Sez–Culture–Technology Adaptation, Technical

Introduction

In the era of globalisation and the knowledge economy, organisations are increasingly shifting from hierarchical control to participatory governance to enhance innovation and organisational resilience. Recent developments in Employee Participation (EP) theory—shaped by the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model—reflect a move from adversarial "power games" to collaborative "value co-creation," where both structural and psychological dimensions of participation play central roles in fostering engagement and commitment (Bui et al., 2025). This evolution broadens participation beyond institutional and behavioural domains to incorporate the psychological engagement that sustains innovation in dynamic environments.
In China's private sector, particularly in SEZs such as Guangzhou, EP is shaped by institutional hybridity, Confucian hierarchical culture, and rapid technological change. Since the initiation of reform and opening-up, management approaches have evolved from "capital-dominated" to "labour–capital collaboration(Gu & Zhang, 2024)." However, substantial empowerment remains elusive as many participation practices are more formalistic than substantive. The Greater Bay Area's transition towards intelligent manufacturing further accentuates the need for deeper employee involvement in innovation and process optimisation.

Despite extensive global literature on EP, three critical gaps persist in understanding its dynamics within Guangzhou's private sector. Firstly, theoretical adaptation gaps arise as Western EP models often fail to fully capture the interplay between SEZ policy incentives and high power-distance cultural norms. Recent research in China shows that organisational power distance significantly shapes the way employee participation in decision-making translates into proactive behaviours, such as task crafting, by influencing psychological ownership and engagement levels (Pervaiz, Li, & Qi, 2024). Secondly, cultural–institutional interaction gaps emerge from the dual-track institutional system in SEZs interacting with Confucian "face-saving" culture, producing hybrid participation mechanisms inadequately explained by existing theories. Thirdly, technological competence gaps manifest in Industry 4.0 contexts, where frontline workers' technical participation competence is underdeveloped and insufficiently researched.

Against this backdrop, the objectives of this study are to: (1) trace the theoretical evolution of EP from Industrial Democracy to Employee Engagement and assess its applicability to the SEZ context; (2) examine the forms and influencing mechanisms of EP in Guangzhou's private sector across manufacturing, technology, and service industries; (3) develop an integrated

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
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"SEZ–Culture–Technology" framework to explain localised participation dynamics; and (4) propose culturally adaptive and technologically feasible strategies to enhance participation effectiveness.

The study contributes to the literature by enriching EP theory with cultural and technological dimensions, proposing "cultural buffering participation design" to reconcile managerial authority with participatory intent, and conceptualising technical participation competence as a determinant of EP effectiveness in digital manufacturing environments. Practically, it offers actionable insights for policymakers and managers seeking to localise participation mechanisms in alignment with institutional requirements and cultural realities.

Literature Review

Four-Stage Evolutionary Model of Employee Participation

The concept of Employee Participation (EP) has undergone a progressive transformation from collective, institution-based involvement to individualised, psychologically driven engagement. This historical trajectory can be summarised in four distinct stages:

Industrial Democracy (ID) emerged during the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution to empower workers through institutional mechanisms such as trade unions, collective bargaining, and co-determination systems. The German Co-Determination Act remains a benchmark example of legally institutionalised worker representation, focusing on material rights and strategic-level decision-making. Recent studies show that while co-determination continues to strengthen employee voice and organizational democracy, it is increasingly challenged by anti-union strategies and shifting labour relations, prompting calls for updated participatory frameworks (Parasuraman, 2025) (Hertwig & Thünken, 2026).

Employee Participation (EP) gained prominence with early behavioural studies such as the Hawthorne experiments and later management frameworks like Theory Y, but its modern application emphasises structured, management-led mechanisms—such as quality circles and joint consultative committees—that enable tactical-level decision involvement without granting full strategic empowerment. Recent research shows that consultative and group decision-making styles can significantly improve decision quality in complex, multi-stage problems compared to autocratic approaches, highlighting the value of structured participation in enhancing organizational outcomes (Rutka, Wróbel, & Wycinka, 2023,Parasuraman et al.2021).

Employee Involvement (EI) – Gaining prominence during the 1980s Total Quality Management (TQM) movement, EI emphasized active behavioural participation at the operational level. Continuous improvement systems such as Toyota's Kaizen encouraged employees to engage in incremental process enhancements and fostered creativity, capability building, and collaboration. However, while Kaizen-driven EI has improved work performance, operational efficiency, and team innovation across diverse sectors, research indicates that many implementations still overlook deeper motivational and emotional needs essential for sustaining engagement (Podlesny, 2024).

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Employee Engagement (EE) – Building on Kahn's original conceptualisation and further extended through the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, EE emphasises employees' psychological investment and discretionary effort. Recent studies show that granting autonomy and fostering intrinsic motivation are central to sustaining high-performance participation, as these resources enhance engagement and innovative behaviour even in dynamic work contexts (Park, 2022). Contemporary practices—such as Google's "20% time" policy—illustrate how autonomy-supportive environments can boost both engagement and creativity, aligning with findings that autonomy satisfaction significantly mediates the link between job resources and work engagement (Kapica, Baka, & Stachura-Krzyształowicz, 2022).

The transition from ID to EE reflects a shift from "institutional power sharing" to "intrinsic value co-creation," with the private sector in Guangzhou currently positioned between the EP and EI stages, showing partial adoption of EE principles in foreign-invested firms but limited penetration in local enterprises.

Comparative Analysis of Theoretical Models

Multiple analytical models have been proposed to explain variations in participation effectiveness:

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Key Employee Participation Models

Model	Core Logic	Theoretical Focus	Applicability to Guangzhou Private Sector	Key Limitations
Historical Trend (Dundon et al., 2022)	Evolution of EP models over time	Temporal integration	Explains hybrid adoption	Descriptive, lacks causal mechanisms
Contingency (Fiedler; participative leadership studies)	Effectiveness depends on context	Adaptive fit model	Guides sector-specific design	Operational complexity
Digital Empowerment (Abhari, 2025)	Digital tools enable participation	Micro-level technology usage	Addresses Industry 4.0 challenges	Overlooks cultural/institutional factors
Institutional Moderation (Khassawneh & Elrehail, 2022)	Institutions moderate effects	Institutional constraints	Reflects SEZ-institutional dynamics	Does not include cultural or tech dimensions

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Interpretation & Relevance to Our Framework

From the above comparative analysis:
Dundon et al. (2022) highlight the historical layering of participation models, supporting our observation that Guangzhou's firms exhibit hybrid forms from structured to behavioural participation.

Contingency logic underscores the need for contextually adaptive models, reinforcing our argument for the "culture-buffered participation design."

Digital empowerment research (Abhari, 2025) foregrounds the critical need for including "technical participation competence" in our framework.

Institutional moderation (Khassawneh & Elrehail, 2022) aligns with the analysis of how SEZ policy intensity shapes participatory mechanisms, complementing our institutional dimension. In summary, integrating elements from these models helps us craft a robust, contextually grounded "SEZ–Culture–Technology" framework that is theoretically sound and empirically relevant to Guangzhou's private sector.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case research design to investigate the evolution and localisation of Employee Participation (EP) mechanisms in the private sector of Guangzhou, a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Such an approach is well-suited for capturing complex institutional–cultural–technological interactions that are not easily reducible to purely quantitative indicators. Recent localised research in Guangdong demonstrates the value of combining interviews, on-site observations, and participatory methods to uncover the nuanced socio-political dynamics shaping participation practices (Li, Duan, & Zhang, 2022). Similarly, case studies in Guangzhou have shown how multi-level stakeholder engagement can reveal the interplay between organisational structures, cultural norms, and evolving participation mechanisms (Yang & Rozaini, 2024).

A multiple-case strategy is preferred over a single case to enable cross-case comparison, thereby enhancing the external validity and theoretical generalisability of findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Case Selection Criteria

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected cases aligned with the research objectives. Six private enterprises were chosen from the manufacturing, technology, and service sectors in Guangzhou.

To qualify, each firm was required to have operated in the SEZ for at least five years, implemented formal or informal EP mechanisms, and provided access to participants across multiple organisational levels. The final sample consisted of two foreign-invested manufacturing firms (automotive components and electronics), two local technology

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enterprises (software development and digital services), and two domestic service firms (hospitality and logistics).

This diversity in ownership, industry type, and technological adoption facilitated richer comparative insights.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted between March and July 2025 using a combination of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and non-participatory observation.

A total of 48 interviews were conducted with 12 senior managers, 14 middle managers, and 22 front-line employees. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees, and was transcribed verbatim. The interview guidelines covered the history and form of EP, perceptions of its effectiveness, the role of technology, and the influence of cultural factors on participation.

Document analysis included internal materials such as human resources policies, training manuals, and meeting records, as well as external documents such as industry reports and special economic zone guidelines. Observation activities were conducted during EP-related events, including suggestion meetings, improvement workshops, and collaborative platform usage, with a total of 12 on-site visits.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted following recent methodological guidance (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023), combining deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes were drawn from theoretical constructs such as institutional adaptation, cultural buffering, and technical participation competence.

Inductive coding enabled the emergence of themes unique to the Guangzhou SEZ context. NVivo 14 software facilitated the systematic organization of qualitative data, ensuring transparency and traceability in the coding process. To identify both convergent and divergent patterns, a cross-case comparison approach was employed, aligning with recent methodological guidance on abductive comparative research in multi-case studies (Pedersen & Blok, 2024).

Triangulation of interviews, documents, and observations ensured credibility and enhanced the robustness of the findings.

Reliability and Validity Measures

Several strategies were implemented to ensure research quality. Construct validity was strengthened through the use of multiple data sources and the development of a detailed case study protocol. Internal validity was enhanced by employing pattern matching and explanation building, while reliability was ensured through the maintenance of an audit trail that documented coding decisions, interview guides, and data collection procedures. External validity was pursued by applying replication logic across cases, enabling theoretical rather than purely statistical generalisation.

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Findings And Analysis

Overview of Case Contexts

The six selected cases represent a diverse cross-section of Guangzhou's private sector, encompassing foreign-invested manufacturing, local technology enterprises, and domestic service firms. The foreign-invested manufacturing firms operate within globally integrated supply chains and maintain structured EP mechanisms such as Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) and quality circles. The local technology enterprises prioritise agility and project-based collaboration, relying on digital communication platforms to facilitate employee input. In contrast, the domestic service firms adopt paternalistic participation models, where decision-making remains largely top-down but is supplemented with informal consultation processes. This diversity in sectoral orientation, ownership structure, and technological readiness provided a rich empirical basis for cross-case comparison.

Forms of Employee Participation in Guangzhou's SEZ

Analysis across cases reveals three dominant forms of EP. First, institutionalised participation is most evident in foreign-invested manufacturing firms, where formal committees and structured consultation forums are mandated by corporate governance protocols and SEZ compliance requirements. Second, technology-enabled participation emerges in technology enterprises, where collaborative platforms, instant messaging tools, and shared digital workspaces facilitate rapid problem-solving and idea sharing. Third, culturally embedded participation is common in domestic service firms, where interpersonal trust and hierarchical respect govern the extent of employee voice. In these contexts, suggestion boxes, informal meetings, and leader–employee dialogues operate as mechanisms for symbolic rather than substantive participation.

Institutional Adaptation and Cultural Buffering

The findings indicate that institutional and cultural dynamics jointly shape EP outcomes. In foreign-invested firms, the institutional transplantation of EP mechanisms is frequently subject to cultural modification. For example, while JCC meetings may be regularly scheduled, agenda-setting is often controlled by senior management, and dissenting opinions are softened to maintain workplace harmony in line with Confucian "face-saving" norms (Xu & Wang, 2024). In local firms, cultural buffering can act as both an enabler and a constraint: it fosters loyalty and trust but can also discourage open disagreement. This duality supports the argument that cultural buffering mediates the relationship between institutional design and employee behavioural response.

Role of Technical Participation Competence

Across all sectors, the ability of employees to contribute meaningfully to decision-making is strongly linked to their technical participation competence. In manufacturing firms, frontline workers with higher digital literacy were more effective in engaging with ERP-based workflow improvements. In technology enterprises, software engineers leveraged collaborative platforms not only for task coordination but also for innovation proposals. In contrast, service firms faced significant barriers, as frontline staff often lacked the skills to use digital suggestion systems, leading to low utilisation rates. These findings align with recent Industry 4.0 research, which

emphasises that technical skills, systemic process understanding, and a digital mindset are critical for enabling effective participation and innovation in digitalised work environments (Townsend, Drebes, & Pedron, 2023).

Cross-Case Comparative Insights

Cross-case analysis highlights distinct participation archetypes. Foreign-invested manufacturing firms exemplify the compliance–adaptation model, where institutionalised mechanisms are locally modified for cultural fit. Local technology enterprises reflect the digital–collaboration model, where participation is integrated into project workflows through technology. Domestic service firms illustrate the paternalistic–symbolic model, where participation serves more as a means of relationship maintenance than organisational change. These archetypes demonstrate that while institutional frameworks and technology provide the structural foundation for participation, cultural dynamics and skill capacity ultimately determine its depth and impact.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

This study examined the evolution, theoretical framing, and practical application of Employee Participation (EP) in the private sector of Guangzhou's Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Drawing on a qualitative multi-case design involving six enterprises from manufacturing, technology, and service industries, the findings reveal three dominant participation forms: institutionalised mechanisms in foreign-invested firms, technology-enabled collaboration in local technology enterprises, and culturally embedded participation in domestic service firms. The analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of EP in Guangzhou's SEZ is shaped by the interplay of institutional adaptation, cultural buffering, and employees' technical participation competence. The study also identifies distinct participation archetypes—compliance–adaptation, digital–collaboration, and paternalistic–symbolic—that capture variations across ownership structures and industry contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

The research contributes to EP scholarship in three keyways. First, it extends institutional adaptation theory by showing how cultural buffering mediates the relationship between formal participation mechanisms and employee behavioural responses. Second, it introduces the concept of technical participation competence as a critical factor in determining participation effectiveness in Industry 4.0 environments, integrating technological capacity into EP theory. Third, it enriches the Asian institutional–cultural model by empirically illustrating how SEZ policy frameworks interact with hierarchical cultural norms to shape hybrid participation ecosystems. Collectively, these contributions respond to recent calls for incorporating cultural and technological dimensions into EP frameworks for emerging economies(Islam, Amin, & Karatepe, 2025).

Practical Implications

For managers, the findings suggest that successful EP design in SEZ contexts requires balancing formal structures with cultural sensitivity and technological readiness. In

manufacturing firms, aligning global best practices with local communication norms can increase employee engagement without undermining efficiency. Technology enterprises should leverage collaborative platforms not only for operational coordination but also for innovation generation, ensuring that employees possess the necessary digital skills. Service firms may benefit from transitioning symbolic participation towards more substantive involvement by providing targeted skill development and structured feedback loops.

Policy Implications

For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of aligning SEZ regulatory frameworks with initiatives that enhance employees' technological capacity and encourage culturally compatible participation practices. SEZ administrations could introduce incentive schemes for firms that invest in digital literacy training and participatory technology adoption. Additionally, policy guidelines should recognise the role of cultural norms in shaping participation and offer adaptable templates for EP mechanisms rather than imposing rigid, one-size-fits-all models.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on a single SEZ, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings. Future research could employ mixed-methods designs to validate the proposed SEZ–Culture–Technology framework across different regions and industries. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining how participation mechanisms evolve over time in response to technological change and institutional reforms. Moreover, quantitative modelling could be used to test the mediating role of cultural buffering and the moderating effect of technical participation competence on EP outcomes.

Acknowledgements: The successful completion of this thesis fills me with deep gratitude. As I write these words, my heart is brimming with sincere thanks to all those who have guided me and offered support along the way. Your company and encouragement have transformed this arduous journey into a process full of strength and warmth. First and foremost, I would like to express my highest respect and deepest gratitude to my primary supervisor, Prof. Dr. Balakrishnan Parasuraman. In the challenging ocean of academic research, you have always been my solid support. From the precise guidance in choosing the research topic, to the meticulous analysis of the theoretical framework, the rigorous examination of data logic in empirical analysis, and the meticulous revision of the final manuscript word by word, every step has benefited from your patient guidance. Your profound knowledge, rigorous academic attitude, and unwavering scholar demeanor in the face of difficulties not only pointed out the direction for my research but also set an example for my future academic pursuits. Secondly, I am grateful to my co-supervisor (Dr. Adi Aizat Bin Yajid) and Dean of the Faculty (Prof. Madya Dr. Dzulkifli bin Mukhtar). Your immense contribution in the field of profession has not only improved the academic level of this research but also widened the

scope of my research. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the faculty and staff of the college for your hard work and generous support. The vibrant academic atmosphere, the rich academic exchange activities and the selfless sharing of knowledge here have jointly created an excellent environment for growth. Every inspiration in the classroom and every collision of wisdom at the seminar have deepened my understanding of this discipline and enriched my academic foundation. Your help and encouragement have given me the courage to overcome all challenges. Last but not least, I would like to express my most sincere and heartfelt gratitude to my beloved family. Your boundless tolerance, silent dedication and unwavering support have always been my strongest backing. During countless nights of hard study, your understanding enabled me to pursue my academic dreams with all my heart; in times of setbacks and self-doubt, your love and encouragement gave me the strength to keep going. This academic achievement is a result of your efforts and expectations, and it is also the greatest gift I can give you. The road ahead is still long, but I am grateful to have shared this journey with all of you. Words cannot fully convey my gratitude. I will continue to forge ahead, living up to everyone who has shown me deep care and high expectations.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the international journal of entrepreneurship and management practices (IJEMP).

Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to this manuscript. Balakrishnan Parasuraman was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology and overall supervision of this study. Adi Aizat Bin Yajid undertook data collection, data analysis and result interpretation. Wang Yajuan conducted the literature review, drafted the original manuscript and performed critical revisions. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.

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