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STRATEGY, STAKEHOLDERS, AND BEHAVIOR: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF GREEN HRM, EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract:

The manufacturing industry around the world is facing increasing pressures related to environmental impacts. China's manufacturing sector is the country's largest energy consumer, operating under increasing pressure in line with national and global sustainability mandates. While previous studies have emphasized the role of Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) in improving environmental performance, the behavioural mechanisms that enable GHRM to influence environmental outcomes are still not adequately understood. In particular, the mediation role of Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) has received limited conceptual attention. This conceptual paper proposes an integrated framework linking Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) with Environmental Performance (EP) through the Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) intermediate mechanism. The framework integrates Resource-Based Insights (RBVs), Stakeholder Theory, and Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) Theory to describe organizational capabilities, external stakeholder pressures, and employee behavior mechanisms. The proposed framework argues that GHRM practices specifically green recruitment and selection, green training and development, green performance evaluation, and green compensation management complement and motivate employees. However, through the empowerment of green workers, these fundamentals translate into tangible environmental outcomes. This framework proposes that the GHRM set organizational conditions for environmental sustainability, while the GEE serves as a behavioral mechanism through which green HR practices translate into better environmental performance. The proposed framework expands on the existing GHRM literature by

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incorporating employee empowerment as an intermediary mechanism that links green HR practices with environmental performance. The paper concludes by proposing four testable hypotheses and outlining implications for future empirical research, human resource management, and sustainable manufacturing practices.

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Keyword:

Ability-Motivation-Opportunity Theory, Environmental Performance, Green Worker Empowerment, Green Human Resource Management, Resource-Based Insights, Stakeholder Theory

Introduction

The manufacturing industry around the world is facing increasing pressures on the environment due to increased energy consumption, generation of hazardous waste, and greenhouse gas emissions. As of 2020, China's manufacturing sector alone accounted for about 56% of the country's total energy consumption, making it the largest energy consumption sector in the world (Cheng et al., 2024). The growth of the manufacturing industry in China has recorded an extraordinary rate with high environmental costs and severe resource reduction, atmospheric pollution, and ecosystem degradation for decades (Cheng et al., 2024). Recognizing these challenges, the Chinese government has outlined green development as a national priority. The Ecological Civilization key initiative and the Made in China 2025 strategic plan explicitly oblige manufacturers to switch to cleaner technologies, sustainable production processes, and green cycle economic models by 2060 (Yang, 2022).

Environmental Achievement (EP) has emerged as a focal point for organizational improvement across China's manufacturing sector. In this context, EP refers to the extent to which an organization meets or complies with established environmental standards (Wiredu et al., 2024). It includes critical outcomes such as pollution reduction, resource conservation, waste reduction, and regulatory compliance (Tu et al., 2024). Although China leads the world in ISO 14001 environmental management certification, the country still ranks 120th out of 180 countries in the 2020 Global Environmental Performance Index, with a score of 37.3, emphasizing the persistent gap between certification and substantive environmental achievement (Zhao et al., 2025). These significant differences highlight that a compliance-based end-to-end approach is inadequate. Organizations in China need a deeper transformation to close the sustainability gap.

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One of the key areas of organizations that need to achieve this transformation is Green Human Resource Management (GHRM). GHRM is defined as the strategic alignment of conventional HRM practices with the organization's environmental objectives, GHRM ensures that the workforce is not only environmentally conscious but also competent, motivated, and empowered to integrate sustainability into daily operations (Al-Swidi et al., 2024; Noor Faezah et al., 2024). Through a system of green hiring, training, performance appraisals, and compensation, GHRM builds what scholars call the green capability of the workforce, transforming human capital into a strategic driver of environmental excellence (Zihan & Makhbul, 2024; Rehan et al., 2024). Empirical evidence from the context of the Asian manufacturing sector consistently confirms that GHRM practices significantly improve environmental performance, confirming the critical role of human resource management in corporate sustainability strategies (Tari & Nirmala, 2025; Zulkarnain et al., 2024).

However, there are critical theoretical and practical gaps. GHRM builds the structural and policy foundations for sustainability. The exact mechanism of how these HR policies translate into measurable environmental outcomes has not yet been adequately explored. The study argues that Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) represents this important missing link. GEE is defined as a set of organizational practices that provide employees with authority, psychological safety, and encouragement to take proactive initiatives in environmental management (Amjad et al., 2024; Ly & Pathak, 2024), GEE transforms the passive recipient of HR's base from top to bottom into an active agent of environmental innovation from the bottom up. Authorized employees are more likely to champion green initiatives on the factory floor, propose resource efficiency improvements, and sustain behavioral changes over time (Umair et al., 2024; Aftab & Veneziani, 2024).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of GHRM, there are three critical gaps that limit theoretical progress. First, the majority of GHRM research is conducted in a broader Western or Asian context, resulting in the regulatory features, culture, and operation of China's manufacturing environment being poorly explored (Zihan & Makhbul, 2024; Wei et al., 2024). Second, previous studies have mostly examined the direct relationship of GHRM-outcome without adequately investigating intermediate mechanisms, especially the empowerment process that explains how GHRM produces behavioral change (Liu et al., 2024; Adu Sarfo et al., 2024). Third, theoretical frameworks tend to be used separately, limiting the explanatory depth of existing models (Yang et al., 2024; Altaee et al., 2024). Thus, this study synthesizes three complementary theoretical perspectives namely Resource-Based Views (RBV), Stakeholder Theory and AMO Theory to build a conceptual framework that suggests that GHRM improves Environmental Performance through the role of an intermediary of Green Worker Empowerment in the context of Chinese manufacturing.

Literature Review

The theoretical basis of the proposed conceptual framework is built on a combination of three different but complementary theories, namely Stakeholder View Theory, Resource-Based View (RBV), and Ability-Motivation-Opportunity Theory (AMO). These theories are integrated addressing firm-level strategic resources, external stakeholder pressures, and individual worker behavior mechanisms as determinants of environmental performance in China's manufacturing sector.

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Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory argues that sustainable business success requires value creation for all parties associated with the firm including employees, customers, regulators, local communities, and supply chain partners. In China's manufacturing sector, firms are facing great double pressure. Top-down regulatory mandates in national policies such as the Ecological Civilization initiative and the 2015 Environmental Protection Law, along with bottom-up demands from international supply chain partners requiring proven environmental compliance as a prerequisite for business partnerships.

The acceptance of the GHRM is not just a discretionary choice but a strategic response to maintain the legitimacy of the institution and operate the expectations of the external community into the internal corporate strategy. Stakeholder Theory goes beyond external compliance to recognize employees as the most strategic internal stakeholders in the organization. When organizations implement GHRM practices to employees in environmental decision-making and innovation, they effectively internalize the expectations of external stakeholders into actions at the field level, transforming employees from passive environmental policy subjects to active co-creators as a result of organizational sustainability (Mu et al., 2024; Yusif & Hafeez-Baig, 2024).

Source-Based View Theory (RBV)

The Resource-Based View, developed by Barney (1991), suggests that organizations achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging valuable, sparse, unmatched, and irreplaceable internal resources (VRINs). In the context of environmental management, intangible resources such as the organization's green culture, employees' environmental expertise, and innovative expertise are considered the most strategic assets because they are extremely difficult for competitors to replicate. This logic has been extended through the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV), which argues that proactive environmental management capabilities, including pollution prevention efficiency and sustainable development, can serve as a source of competitive advantage.

In this perspective, GHRM is conceptualized as an investment in strategic human capital. By implementing systematic green hiring, environmentally focused training, and sustainability-related incentive systems, organizations build a unique workforce for environmental excellence. Additionally, Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) serves as an intangible strategic asset that strengthens a firm's human capital base, enabling organizations to leverage the implicit knowledge, creative problem-solving, and factory floor innovations of frontline workers to produce rare and elusive environmental performance outcomes (Farrukh et al., 2024).

Ability-Motivation-Opportunity Theory (AMO)

Stakeholder Theory and RBV address the macro-strategic and external dimensions of green HR practices, the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory, popularized by Appelbaum et al. (2000), provides a micro-behavioral mechanism by which environmental outcomes are ultimately achieved. The AMO framework argues that the optimal performance of employees can be realized when individuals simultaneously possess the necessary skills (Ability), are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to strive (Motivation), and are given structural conditions that allow them to use their abilities effectively (Opportunity).

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In the context of the GHRM, the mapping of these behaviors is direct in theory: green recruitment and training systematically build the environmental competence and technical knowledge of employees (Capabilities); Green performance evaluations and compensation systems foster willingness to engage in pro-environmental initiatives voluntarily (Motivation). However, a thorough review of the AMO framework emphasizes that Opportunity represents an irreplaceable boundary condition (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). Without an organizational context that provides employee autonomy, psychological safety, and participatory decision-making structures, capabilities and motivations remain hidden and not translated into action. Within the proposed framework, the Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) includes a critical component of these opportunities. Without empowering employees to meaningfully participate in environmental decision-making and green innovation, even the most sophisticated GHRM practices will fail to produce tangible and sustained improvements in an organization's environmental performance.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Based on the integrated theory of RBV, Stakeholder Theory and AMO Theory, the conceptual framework is guided by Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) as an independent variable, Environmental Performance (EP) as a key dependent variable, and Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) as a critical intermediary mechanism that links HR strategy with environmental action. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed relationship and the hypothesis developed.

Green Human Resource Management (GHRM)

The GHRM in the proposed framework encompasses four interconnected integrated dimensions that collectively incorporate sustainability throughout the employee lifecycle. These practices are not isolated functional activities but form a systemic approach to building an ecology-centered workforce culture:

(1) ***Green Recruitment and Selection (GRS):*** This dimension involves the process of filtering, and hiring candidates whose values, attitudes, and competencies are in line with the natural objectives of the organization. Firms implement green employer branding and include environmental criteria in job descriptions, selection interviews, and evaluation processes to ensure new hires arrive with the ecological mindset needed to support sustainability programs from day one on the job (Bangura & Lourens, 2024; Sedana & Triyuni, 2024).

(2) ***Green Training and Development (GTD):*** GTDs systematically equip employees with the environmental knowledge, technical skills, and behavioral competencies necessary to perform their roles in an ecological sense. Training programs may include waste reduction methodologies, energy-saving techniques, cyclical economic principles, and pollution prevention strategies. By building an organization's green intelligence in stages, GTD ensures that the workforce has the collective ability to achieve long-term sustainability targets (Devi, 2024; Altaee et al., 2024; Choudhary & Datta, 2024).

(3) ***Green Performance Assessment (GPA):*** GPA incorporates green Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) into a standard performance evaluation framework. By measuring, monitoring, and providing feedback on employees' contributions to

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environmental goals, GPA establishes individual and departmental ownership of ecological outcomes and signals that sustainability is an organization's core priority, not an optional addition (Sadek & Karkoulian, 2025; Huraerah et al., 2025; Saputri et al., 2024).

(4) ***Green Compensation Management (GCM):*** GCM strategically leverages monetary rewards (e.g., green performance bonuses, sustainability-related wage increases) and non-monetary recognition to establish a clear link between environmental achievement and employee incentives. By harnessing motivational psychology, GCM reinforces the message that green performance is organizationally valued, financially rewarded, and professionally recognized, thus maintaining a long-term behavioral commitment to sustainability (Yin et al., 2024; Masri & Jaaron, 2017; Ardiza et al., 2021).

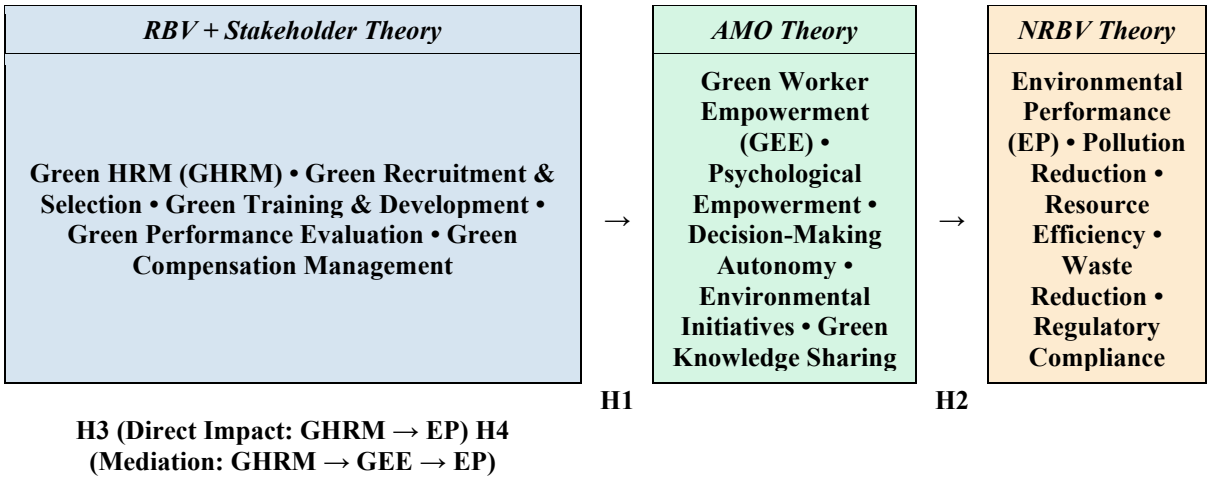

Figure 1: GHRM's Proposed Conceptual Framework, Green Worker Empowerment, and Environmental Performance

Source: Author's own conceptualization based on RBV, stakeholder theory and AMO theory (2025)

Hypothesis Development

H1: GHRM → Green Worker Empowerment

Empirical research consistently shows that GHRM significantly fosters Green Worker Empowerment by shaping psychological thinking and providing structural tools for environmental responsibility. Under the AMO framework, providing green competencies (Capabilities) to employees through training, reinforcing nature-conscious behaviors through performance evaluations and incentives (Motivation), as well as creating participatory decision-making structures (Opportunities) collectively produce psychological and organizational conditions in which empowerment flourishes (Appelbaum et al., 2000). In the context of China's high-pressure environment, where the highest management's commitment to sustainability is critical. An effort to overcome institutional inertia, GHRM signifies true leadership commitment, further enhancing employees' sense of personal agency and willingness to take initiative in environmental transformation (Shaukat et al., 2023).

H1: There is a significant positive impact of Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) on Green Worker Empowerment (GEE).

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H2: Green Worker Empowerment → Environmental Performance

Authorized employees are far more likely to demonstrate pro-environmental behaviors on a discretionary and voluntary basis beyond their formal job requirements such as identifying wasted energy, suggesting process improvements, volunteering for green teams, and proactively flagging compliance risks before they escalate into violations (Wiredu et al., 2024). From an RBV perspective, an empowered workforce is an intangible asset that is unique, valuable, and hard to replicate; The implied knowledge and innovative capabilities of workers on the factory floor, when released through empowerment, produce superior environmental outcomes such as reduced emissions, increased resource efficiency, and waste reduction that are difficult for competitors to replicate (Zakari, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024).
H2: There is a significant positive impact of Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) on Environmental Performance (EP).

H3: GHRM → Environmental Performance (Direct Impact)

In addition to the mediation route, GHRM also directly improves Environmental Performance through its dual strategic role. Under the RBV, the GHRM serves as a firm-level strategic capability that develops an engaged and environmentally competent workforce capable of implementing green strategies with accuracy and consistency (Barney, 1991). Under Stakeholder Theory, the GHRM simultaneously functions as an organizational mechanism that aligns internal human capital with social, regulatory, and external market expectations, thus increasing the legitimacy of the corporate environment and reducing regulatory risks (Freeman, 1984). Empirical studies in the context of China's manufacturing sector confirm that significant reductions in emissions and improved resource efficiency among companies implementing GHRM practices across the board (Noor Faezah et al., 2024; Zihan & Makhbul, 2024).
H3: There are significant positive effects of Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) on Environmental Performance (EP).

H4: The Role of GEE Intermediaries (GHRM → GEE → EP)

The GHRM provides a structural foundation for environmental sustainability, Green Worker Empowerment serves as a critical behavioral channel that converts HR policy intentions into real, measurable environmental actions (Kularathne, 2020; Dumont et al., 2017). Even the most meticulously designed GHRM system produces only latent potential; without the psychological security, autonomy, and participatory structure embodied in the GEE, the capabilities and motivations of employees remain unexplored and cannot produce tangible organizational results (Appelbaum et al., 2000). In the specific context of China's manufacturing sector, where hierarchical organizational cultures may suppress innovation from the bottom up, empowerment is particularly important as a mechanism that breaks down compliance barriers and drives continuous environmental improvements on the factory floor (Wang et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2024).
H4: Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) significantly mediates the positive relationship between Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) and Environmental Performance (EP).

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Conclusion

This conceptual paper contributes to the academic literature on sustainable human resource management by advancing a multi-level integrated theoretical framework that connects three fundamental theories, namely Resource-Based Insights (RBV), Stakeholder Theory, and the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) Framework in the context of China's manufacturing empirical importance. By identifying Green Worker Empowerment (GEE) that links structural GHRM practices to tangible improvements in Environmental Performance, the study goes beyond direct documentation to explain the complex psychological, structural, and behavioral mechanisms by which HR strategies ultimately produce ecological outcomes (Fawehinmi et al., 2024).

The contribution of this framework theory translates into three things. First, it expands the RBV study by showing that an empowered green workforce is an unrivalled strategic asset, its implicit knowledge and innovative capacity to produce an environmental performance advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate (Jabbour & Renwick, 2024). Second, it advances Stakeholder Theory by illustrating how GHRM functions as an organizational mechanism that internalizes external environmental pressures from regulators, global supply chains, and civil society into actionable internal employee behaviors (Adu Sarfo et al., 2024). Third, it enriches AMO Theory by empirically establishing GEE as an opportunity dimension that determines whether the abilities and motivations developed through GHRM truly translate into pro-environmental actions at the individual and organizational levels (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023).

From a practical point of view, the framework provides an integrated guide for HR directors, operations managers, sustainability officers, and government policymakers operating in the context of a high-pressure environment in Chinese manufacturing. This framework demonstrates that it achieves authentic environmental sustainability, in contrast to purely symbolic compliance such as holding ISO 14001 certification, requiring more than just a top-down regulatory mandate or a technical solution of the pipe end. It demands the proactive construction of an empowered and environmentally conscious workforce, equipped with the equipment, motivation, and structural capabilities to drive continuous environmental innovation on the factory floor as part of their daily organizational life (Tu et al., 2024; B. Yang et al., 2024).

Future research should validate the proposed framework through quantitative structural equation models with large-scale samples taken from various sub-sectors of China's manufacturing. Additionally, potential boundary requirements such as organizational size, ownership structure, intensity of the industrial environment, and organizational culture should be studied as a moderator. Cross-country comparative studies will also enrich understanding of whether the GHRM-GEE-EP pathway operates with equal strength across different cultural and regulatory contexts. Finally, this study confirms that organizational sustainability and competitive success are not competing objectives but a mutually reinforcing need, and that strategically investing in the empowerment of green workers is among the most powerful pathways available for Chinese manufacturing companies to achieve their environmental missions and contribute meaningfully to the national sustainability agenda.

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