Human resource management research and practice in Asia: Past, present and future

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ABSTRACT

The continuing emergence of Asia as a critically important continent for the foreseeable future has renewed interest in understanding theory and practice in this region. This special issue was designed to shed light on human resource management (HRM) issues in this region, and to help guide future research in and on this region. In this introductory article, we first analyze the growth of HRM scholarship in Asia, by examining the research published over the last twenty-five years. We then describe the genesis of this special issue, and summarize the key themes emerging from the review articles in the issue. These include: psychological contract; work-life interface; corporate social responsibility; multinational corporations and their subsidiaries; the challenges of global talent management; convergence-divergence; state socialism to post-state socialism; and incorporating the context. We further offer suggestions for future research by proposing critical topics and emerging themes, including: employee voice; diversity and inclusion; employee well-being and resilience; preparing and responding to crises; and green human resource management. We conclude by offering theoretical perspectives and highlighting key recent developments which are likely to impact future practice, and should be addressed by scholars.

1. Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) research and practice scholarship in Asia has grown rapidly in the last twenty-five years, following the call for more self-confidence from indigenous Asian scholars (Meyer, 2006). Much of that scholarship has been published in top HRM journals focused on modelling, testing and extending western-developed, positivist theories. For example, a comprehensive search and screening of journal databases, including EBSCO, Emerald, SAGE, Springer, Taylor and Francis, Web of Science, and Wiley, shows that nearly 3000 English journal articles have been published as of 2019 on HRM in China (broadly defined to include organizational behavior and employment relations topics with implications for HRM), over 1000 articles on India, over 600 articles on Japan, and over 700 articles on Korea. In addition, several books about HRM systems, strategies, policies and practices in Asian countries have been published (e.g., Budhwar, Varma, & Kumar, 2019; Cooke & Kim, 2018; Rowley & Oh, 2019; Varma & Budhwar, 2014).

To continue this momentum of HRM research and practice in Asia, we compiled this Special Issue (SI) to: 1) provide a single source of selected articles that summarize what we know about the previous twenty-five years' work in HRM research and practice in Asia; and 2) propose research and practice themes that scholars in HRM research and practice in Asia might consider in the future. In

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addition, such an SI is timely, as the continent is experiencing a relatively high level of economic growth compared with some developed economies, high levels of uncertainty from the pandemic and financial crises, dramatic technological advancements, and rapidly changing business strategies and structures, as well as a growing trend of non-standard employment, particularly in emerging economies like China and India (Lanvin & Monteiro, 2019; Schwab, 2019). It is therefore important to capture and reflect on these developments through a systematic review effort, and offer suggestions for future research and practice, that themselves will be subject to another systematic review in twenty-five years' time! It is also important for us to acknowledge up front that given the heterogeneity and diversity of the region, it will be mission impossible to provide a comprehensive coverage of HRM in Asia in this SI, Rather, our aim is to reveal the research and practice that has been and could be done on HRM research and practice throughout Asia.

This SI on *HRM Research and Practice in Asia* includes articles on several HRM themes in the Asian context. These themes collectively reflect a subset of those that the SI editors identified in the Call for Papers that was sent in 2018. The expanded set included:

- Employee creativity and innovation
- Talent management and mobility
- Performance management
- Workplace inequality, employee voice, and diversity management
- (New) employment modes and worklife balance
- Cross-country comparative studies on particular HRM themes
- Offshore outsourcing and implications for HRM
- Multinational firms from Asia operating across the globe
- Multinational firms operating in Asia
- The role of leadership styles, culture and employee behaviors
- Psychological contracts
- Corporate social responsibility, employee well-being and resilience.

These themes were identified by Cooke and Kim (2018), Varma and Budhwar (2014), Tung (2016), Jackson, Schuler, and Jiang (2014), Jiang and Messersmith (2018), and Tarique, Briscoe, and Schuler (2018). For this SI, authors were also invited to explore other themes beyond those listed above that are relevant to this SI. Consistent with *HRMR*'s scope, review articles were strongly encouraged.

The final set of articles included in this SI represents a body of research and practice associated with HRM in Asia. While these articles do not include all the themes listed above, we propose that they do represent a significant number of them. They also provide guidance for future work that might be conducted on HRM in Asia. In essence, this introductory article describes the content of: 1) what has been done over the past twenty-five years (past and present) in HRM research and practice in Asia (as identified by our contributors and our review of the literature); and 2) suggestions from these SI editors about the possible focus/themes of research and practice for the next twenty-five years (future). There is clearly some overlap between these two bodies of research and practice, albeit with some modifications, both in terminology and coverage, but there are some important extensions as well.

2. Review of the articles in this special issue

2.1. Psychological contract theme

Kutaula, Gillani, and Budhwar's review of 96 articles provides a comprehensive analysis of the existing psychological contract research conducted in Asia over the period from 1998 to 2019. The review provides insights into the trends in psychological contract theory in Asia over the past two decades by analyzing contextual factors as an important feature impacting HRM and employment relationships, paving the way for contextually embedded Asia-driven research pertaining to psychological contract theory. The review also has management implications. As the authors advised, managers need to understand the sociocultural and institutional factors as embedded in the various Asian countries, impacting psychological contracts between employees and organizations. For example, from a sociocultural perspective, the religious and cultural ethos may vary among Asian countries, and consequently, the structure and nature of the psychological contract will not have a single standard manifestation, but can be shaped to accommodate the multiple and varied expectations of specific countries. At the same time, a collectivist and long-term approach may strengthen the relational psychological contract and engender employees' cooperation.

2.2. Work-life interface theme

Le, Menzies, Newman, Zheng, and Fermelis's systematic review of 66 empirical studies of work-life interface (WLI) research in Asia shows that this growing body of research has investigated the range of effects of various work–life constructs, such as work–life balance, work–family conflict, work–family enrichment, and work–family culture in Asia, on work and non-work outcomes. The review sheds light on how cultural, economic and institutional factors influence employee perceptions of WLI. In particular, the impact of several cultural factors on WLI in shaping individuals' perceptions and experiences of WLI, an important finding of the review, is worth highlighting: these include Confucianism, *guanxi*, Hinduism and Islam, individualism versus collectivism, and gender norms. Based on the review, the authors develop a conceptual framework by summarizing previous studies and highlighting new antecedents and outcomes. They also argue for the need for methodological advancement, multilevel analysis, and an extension of

work–life constructs in Asia.

2.3. Corporate social responsibility theme

Xiao, Cooke, Xu, and Bian's systematic review of 88 journal articles examines the extent to which corporate social responsibility (CSR) constitutes part of HRM in the Chinese context—a topic that has attracted considerable research attention in the last decade. The authors identify categories of the CSR-HRM relationship (including causality), phenomena of CSR–HRM examined, perceived drivers of CSR-HRM, and consequences and effects of CSR-HRM. The authors argue that CSR incorporates multiple dimensions (e.g., ideology, strategy, policy, practice, process, outcome), involving multiple stakeholders (e.g., those who work for the company, trade unions, customers, local communities, and local authorities). How these all interact with each other and with the HRM system in different societal, industrial and organizational contexts at a given time makes it a very complex and dynamic research topic, which can be examined from different perspectives and at different levels, with theoretical and practical implications. The authors accentuate the need for more context-driven and interdisciplinary and multi-level research oriented to organizational problem-solving, to make CSR–HRM studies more legitimate and relevant for businesses and societies. They also call for a more in-depth and refined approach to research design, in order to better understand organizational CSR–HRM practices, workplace environments, and related outcomes. Finally, the authors illustrate a number of areas that warrant future research attention, including: the potential negative impact of CSR–HRM practices on employees; corporate irresponsibility and HRM; CSR and innovation behavior; digitalization, gig economy and CSR; integrating CSR and HRM systems strategically; the intersectionality of CSR–HRM and diversity; and CSR and Chinese MNCs, to identify the added complexity of differences in political ideology, management approach, business strategy, and perception of host country institutional actors.

2.4. Multinational corporations and their subsidiaries theme

Benoy and Morley's article is on Indian MNCs with subsidiaries in Ireland. It is an example of the growing investment of Asian MNCs in smaller western economies, a phenomenon that calls for a deeper understanding of the drivers of location choice among these MNCs, and for more compelling accounts of the parenting and management of the subsidiaries being established. Assembling theoretical insights from the literature on parenting styles and headquarter-subsidiary interactions, coupled with practice-led ob-servations garnered from Indian MNCs, the authors develop a conceptual framework elucidating key variations in headquarter-subsidiary relationships and the HRM policy and practice mix. They reason that the preferred approach to corporate parenting, vested in adding value to the subsidiary, extracting value from it, or seeking a balance in the overall exchange, results in a range of interactions between headquarters and subsidiaries, encompassing integration, collaboration or local responsiveness. The authors further postulate that the preferred headquarter-subsidiary interactions influence the subsequent HRM policies and practices adopted in the subsidiary setting as it seeks to build its strategic position within the broader MNC network. In order to deepen lines of inquiry around these different interactions, we advance a series of propositions for testing. The framework and propositions the authors present in the article explicate a suite of drivers underlying the location choice decisions of emerging Indian MNCs establishing subsidiaries in the smaller advanced economy context of Ireland. Furthermore, it elaborates a range of possible corporate parenting approaches adopted by these MNCs, resulting both in variations in the subsequent headquarter-subsidiary interactions (integration, collaboration, local responsiveness) and in the final selection of HRM policies and practices.

2.5. Global talent management (GTM) challenges in MNCs theme

Froese, Shen, Sekiguchi and Davies' review of GTM challenges in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean MNCs examines how the rapid expansion of MNCs from China, Japan and Korea has presented them with major challenges in GTM and the underlying reasons for this. This comprehensive comparative overview reveals similarities in ethnocentric staffing, traditional headquarters-driven orga-nizational cultures, and home-country language policies. The authors found that, while there are striking differences in performance appraisal, reward and compensation, and performance and career management, these GTM practices of Chinese, Japanese and Korean MNEs are converging to western-style global best practices, albeit at different levels. A particular interesting aspect of the authors' findings relates to the linguistic ethnocentrism among Asian MNEs. The authors argue that such a phenomenon may alter the power-authority relationship between the headquarters and the subsidiary employees in these east Asian MNCs whose official na-tional language is not English.

The authors identify international experience to be an important factor that affects the dynamics between the headquarters and foreign subsidiaries. They encourage future research to further scrutinize the effects of various organizational characteristics, e.g. size and industry, and perhaps even management characteristics, such as background of top managers, to understand the process that leads to the convergence of GTM. Building on and enriching the convergence debate and the distance literature, the authors identified organizational and national characteristics, and presented them in a framework that offers a better understanding of the reasons that account for the similarities and differences in GTM practices of MNCs across different countries.

2.6. Convergence-divergence theme

Mishra and Sohani's article takes an in-depth look at the convergence and divergence debate around human resources and in-dustrial relations practices in Asia. The authors note that the dominance of specific industries in some nations is often attributed to a

whole series of factors, including the nations' policy environment, technical and operational competence, and the practice of innovative revenue generation models. It is with this background that the authors examine the competitive advantage of two leading economies, with reference to their sectoral dominance: China in the manufacturing sector and India in the information technology (IT) sector. Using a structured approach, the authors identified 135 articles for the period 1999–2019, as this period saw a significant increase in scholars' interest in these two countries due to the changes occurring as a result of their economic liberalization policies.

Based on their analyses of the relevant literature, the authors find that the two leading Asian economies, China and India, have managed to overcome crippling economic recession and provide sustained growth for over three decades. Furthermore, each country's distinct context-specific advantage – China in manufacturing and India in IT information technology – has played a critical role in the growth and success of the nation, as is well noted. In this context, the authors attempt to tease out the possible role of HRM and industrial relations (IR) practices in their success through the lenses mentioned above. They go on to note that the HRM and IR practices of China, specifically the micro divergence of HRM practices and divergence of IR practices, keep the transaction cost of labor low in the Chinese labor market. The reduced transaction cost ensures the dominance of China in the manufacturing industry. On the other hand, in India, the IT sector is characterized by a fast-changing technological and competency landscape, which leads to uncertainty and the high value of HRM. As a result, the HRM practices have to be innovative and localized, reflected in low firm specificity and high usage specificity. Overall, the authors argue that the convergence or divergence of sector-specific practices are a result of the success of specific sectors in each country – manufacturing in China, and IT in India.

2.7. From state socialism to post-state socialism theme

Serafini, Wood, and Szamosi's qualitative review of people management after state socialism takes us to an undeniably diverse region that has undergone significant political and economic reform that has brought about fundamental changes to people's life and workplace management. The authors review the existing evidence base on the practice of people management in the context of post-state socialist countries of Asia, focusing on Asian successor states of the Soviet Union and those under direct Soviet domination. They identify a disarticulation between liberal market reforms, economic progress, the ability to attract FDI, and the development and persistence of a formal employment base. The review highlights how reforms in one area may lead to counter-movements in others, shoring up existing modes of people management. The authors find that whilst clans and middle classes both have channels for political advocacy, there are fewer opportunities for workers and their representatives; this means that there is little impetus for legislation to promote better practice, workplace inclusivity and equity. They further reveal that many of the features common in people management across emerging markets are evident in most of the countries under review, including a prominent role for family owned businesses characterized by autocratic paternalism, low pay, and poor working conditions somewhat ameliorated by informal mutual obligations. A further feature is segmentation, with a sharp divide between state and large enterprises and many smaller businesses, many of the latter being scarcely able to generate a means of subsistence. These are highly informative revelations with insightful analysis, reminding us of the need to look into the societal context in order to understand how people are managed, and what profound challenges arise in the drive to improve workers' welfare and well-being. Taking fuller account, the authors suggest, of the role of political elites, and the core interests behind ruling parties, might help explain the embedded nature of, and trajectories of reform to, HRM systems in many other national and regional contexts.

2.8. Incorporating the context theme

Do, Patel, Budhwar, and Doa provide an overview of the historical, political, socio-cultural and economic conditions of the ASEAN countries through a systematic review of their HRM practices. The authors analyze the current state of HRM studies in the ASEAN region, and identify the key challenges faced by the nations that make up the ASEAN. The review demonstrates the institutional complexity that influences labor-management relations in general and HRM practices in particular in ASEAN countries, in varing degrees. Countries that make use of their institutional attributes in order to reform, innovate, and develop the economy have made significant achievements in socio-economic developments (e.g., Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam). In addition, HRM practices have been valued, effectively invested, and diffused in these countries. By contrast, those countries that do not reform and innovation have experienced low levels of socio-economic development, and therefore HRM practices are less developed (e.g., Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar). Pursuant to their analyses, the authors propose eight specific research ideas for scholars of the ASEAN bloc, including for example: cross-level comparative HRM analysis among ASEAN countries; examining how MNCs' HR departments might adapt or modify HRM policies and practices imported from western countries to suit local conditions; the evolving strategic role of HRM; and the role of dominant state ideologies as well as national cultures in shaping the HRM systems in each of the ASEAN nations.

3. Suggestions for future HRM research and practice: expanding the themes

As described above, in the articles contained in this SI, there are several important themes that have been and are the focus of HRM research and practice in Asia. In addition to those, it is important to note that commitment and leadership have been among the most popular themes over the past twenty-five years. For example, a quick search on the article titles shows that in the Korean context, there are over 70 articles on leadership and over 60 articles on commitment, compared with 20 or so articles on financial rewards (pay, compensation and benefits). Similarly, in the Chinese context, there are over 300 articles on leadership, nearly 100 articles on commitment, and 70 articles on financial rewards. It is interesting to note that transformational leadership appears to be

the most popular type of leadership for research in the Chinese (45 out of 300-plus leadership studies) and Korean contexts (16 out of 70-plus leadership studies). Corporate social responsibility and psychological contracts have also attracted considerable research attention, as Xiao et al.'s article in this SI demonstrates.

Today, with the world going through a major pandemic, financial and economic upheaval, and tremendous uncertainty, Asian countries are going through major health, social, and economic challenges. As a consequence, many Asian countries are at the forefront of developments in health, technology, economy, climate, environment, supply chain management, business strategy and structure, and globalization. At the same time, work intensification has become widespread in East Asian countries such as Japan, China and Korea. In fact, overwork-related death (*Karoshi*) and suicide, a major problem that has been confronting Japan for a long time, have led to the introduction of a legal penalty in 2018 to restrict overtime, and a major revision of the *Labour Standards Law* that came into effect in 2019 (Kubo & Ogura, 2021). These changes call for new HRM research and practice themes, new angles to capture business/organizational phenomena with people management implications, and new ways of conceptualizing what is happening in Asian countries.

In this section, we propose several possible themes for future HRM research in Asia, including some detailed suggestions for specific questions to be addressed in them. These are consistent with the Asian culture context of paternalism, collectivism, obedience, and self-sacrifice, often at the expense of individual rights and well-being (c.f. Cheng et al., 2014). We wish to note that our selected thematic topics for future research are representative rather than exhaustive of what we foresee as themes for fruitful and valuable work. Researchers interested in the field of HRM research and practice in Asia are strongly encouraged to identify other contextual events and interpret them, intellectually and empirically, and expand the focus of this field. For the proposed themes described below, Table 1 provides a list of examples of research questions for more detailed investigations.

3.1. Employee voice, diversity, and workplace inclusion themes

3.1.1. Employee voice

Employee voice, diversity, and workplace inclusion are a strand of employee-oriented HRM topics that have been rarely studied in Asian countries. For example, a search on journal article titles indicates that there are only two recent studies on voice in Japan (Kim & Ishikawa, 2018; Matsunaga, 2014), three on India (e.g., Mellahi, Budhwar, & Li, 2010), five on Korea (e.g., Bae, Chuma, Kato, Kim, & Ohashi, 2010; Lee, Choi, Youn, & Chun, 2017), and considerably more voice studies (over 40) on China (e.g., Hu & Jiang, 2018; Zhang, Huai, & Xie, 2015). Although there may actually be more studies that cover employee voice than the title suggests, this crude statistics does, nonetheless, indicate that there is plenty more to be researched in this area. Specifically, we encourage more research on employee voice, not only along the line of what promotive or prohibitive voice and employee suggestions schemes will add value or reduce harm to the organization, and under what boundary conditions these schemes may work (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012); but also, importantly, we call for more research to explore the extent to which organizations in Asia may adopt voice practices to provide channels for employees to raise their grievances and dissatisfaction. This is particularly important for countries where procedures for employee grievance redressal are not articulated in the labour law/regulation system (Cooke, Xie, & Duan, 2016). Even where such regulatory provisions are available, their utility may not be ideal. In the interest of developing a cooperative workplace relationship, a soft and self-regulatory approach may be desirable to complement the formal legal provisions, or as an alternative in the absence of formal provisions. The ability to create an open and supportive workplace environment is critical to buffer work-related grievances, stress, anxiety and fear. It will also contribute to enhancing employees' well-being and resilience, a topic which we will discuss in Section 3.2.

3.1.2. Diversity and workplace inclusion

As with voice, despite the diversity of Asian societies, the concept of diversity and inclusion have hardly been featured in HRM research and practice in East Asia. For example, research on equal opportunity and diversity in the Chinese, Japanese and Korean contexts has largely focused on gender (mainly female) equality (e.g., Kato & Kodama, 2018; Ouyang, Lam, & Wang, 2015). This narrow focus may reflect the relatively homogenous nature of the population in terms of ethnicity and religious beliefs. Diversity and inclusion issues related to age, physical ability and migrancy are much less well examined. In comparison, there is a higher proportion of research on diversity issues in the Indian context, albeit still rather small in relation to the number of HRM studies in general. The coverage of diversity is also broader than that found in East Asian countries. For example, Rao (2012) investigates the impact of religion in Indian workplaces, whereas Kulkarni, Boehm, and Basu (2016) examine workplace inclusion of persons with disabilities by comparing practices in Indian and German MNCs. Again, there is much scope for expanding diversity and inclusion research in Asian contexts, including East Asian societies, to examine, for example: men in female-dominated occupations and organizations; older workers; migrant workers, workplace bullying associated with demographic differences; sexuality, disability, disease victims, and workplace exclusion.

Workforce diversity varies considerably in nature and extent across Asian societies and requires a greater level of policy and managerial attention than there has been. It is desirable that economic achievements should be underpinned by improved levels of equal opportunity and social justice; for example, the need to deploy and manage older workers effectively will become a pertinent issue for Asian countries in the near future. According to the ILO 2018 modelled estimation (ILO, 2019), the median age of the workforce in the most advanced Asian economies will be above 40, with some (Japan and Korea) approaching 50 by 2030 (see Fig. 1). Workforce aging is not only an HRM opportunity for employing organizations, but also an important matter with strong social policy implications for national governments. More research efforts in this area will provide evidence to inform policy and practice.

Table 1

Examples of research themes and research questions for future studies of HRM research and practice in Asia.

Examples of research themes	Examples of research questions
Employee voice, diversity and inclusion	• How does societal culture (e.g. paternalism, self-sacrifice, high-power distance) influence employees' willingness to voice their concerns? • What, if any, types of diversity and inclusion policies and practices should be in place in workplaces? • What are the managers' attitudes towards diversity and inclusion at their workplace? • Given the near absence of public discourse on diversity management and inclusion in east Asian countries, who can play an advocacy and agency role to advance this agenda? • What role can workers themselves play to gain more voice, either individually or collectively? • How can the countries learn from each other in their efforts to more effectively advance workplace inclusion and diversity? • What can government policy makers do to further voice and diversity and inclusion in the workplace?
Employee well-being and employee resilience	• What are the sources of stress and anxiety at workplaces? • How does the national and organizational culture impinge on employees' awareness of, and willingness to reveal, their emotional state of mind/psychological conditions and seek help/support? • What types of EAPs have been provided by the employers, if any (e.g., formal and informal) to support employees, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, or other crises (also described below)? • Are these EAPs prevention-oriented or remedy-oriented? • How effective are these EAP schemes and other HRM practices in reducing their stress and improve their resilience and well-being? • How can organizations help employees manage their virtual work teams so as to minimize stress and retain productivity? • What HRM interventions are adopted by the organizations to assist employees and improve their resilience? • What types of HRM practices may enhance employees' well-being and through what mechanisms and processes, especially during and after a crisis? • What are the self-coping strategies adopted by individual employees to overcome their stress and increase their resilience and well-being? What is the role of family and community in collectivist societies in building workers' resilience and retaining worker loyalty? • What is the role of societal, cultural and religious institutions in informing EAPs, employee wellness and resilience-enhancement practices?
Crisis preparation and management	• What change may happen, after a crisis, to the nature of the business, its locations and the way production processes are managed? • In the event of change, what are the implications for HRM policies and practices such as compensation, recruitment, selection, compensation, evaluation and appraisal, career opportunities, nature of work, safety and health, testing protocols, training, and working with other employees virtually or actually? • What are the best ways to furlough or lay off employees? • What are the best ways to manage compensation and benefits? • What is the value of planning and preparing for potential crises? • What does it take for organizations to more effectively manage their crises?
Green HRM	• What GHRM policies and practices are used by organizations in Asian countries? How may they differ from those adopted in western countries? And what are the effects? • Who should be involved in designing the set of GHRM policies and practices to be used by organizations? • What is the best way to involve employees in environmental CSR? • Should organizations spread their GHRM policies and practices across their supply chains, and if so, how? • What is the role of HRM in addressing the contributions of the organization in its mitigation of climate change? • What is the best way to promote GHRM across different units of MNCs?
HRM strategy and business strategy of MNCs in and from Asian countries	• What global business strategy and HRM strategy, policy and practices do Asian MNCs adopt, particularly those *from* emerging economies *to* emerging economies in the region? • How do these strategies, policies and practices differ and evolve across subsidiaries, and to what effect? • What are the key challenges for emerging MNCs in implementing their global HRM strategy, including GTM strategy, policy and practice in their subsidiaries, with business implications? • What is the strategic role of the emerging Asian markets for the MNCs? And to what extent do the MNCs want to develop the Asian markets via their subsidiaries and incorporate them as an integral part of their global business? • Are MNCs pursuing a strategic asset-seeking internationalization strategy more receptive to their subsidiaries' local conditions and needs, and adopting a more locally responsive GTM strategy than those that pursue a market-exploitation strategy? • How is the rising level of protectionism exacerbated by the global pandemic impinging on the internationalization strategy of MNCs from and in Asian countries? And how may this impact their HRM strategies, policies and practices?

Table 1 (*continued*)

| Examples of research themes	Examples of research questions
Convergence-divergence of HRM systems in Asia	• How does national context impact the ways HRM and IR systems converge and diverge in Asia? • What impact do sectoral characteristics have on people-based systems and competitiveness of the sector? • How does sectoral dominance impact the convergence and divergence of specific HRM and IR practices? • What role do foreign MNCs play in the convergence of HRM systems, or aspects of the systems? • In what ways may climate change, digitalization, and economic globalization and deglobalization have converging or diverging effects on national HRM and IR systems?

Source: compiled by the authors.
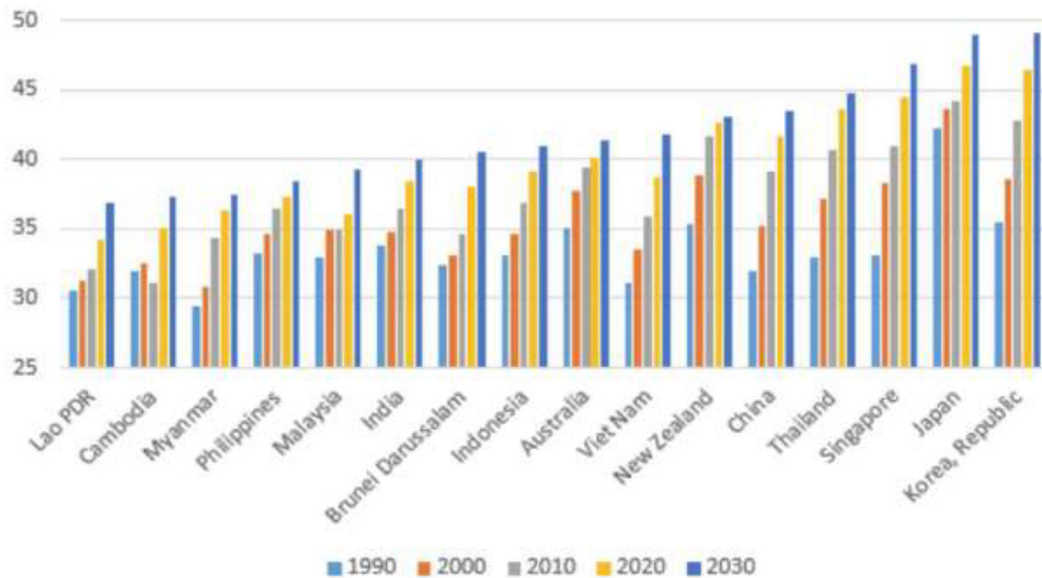
Fig. 1. Median age of the labour force (years), 1990–2030.
(Source: ILO (2019, p. 17).)

3.2. Employee well-being and employee resilience themes

Similar to HRM research and practice in Asia on voice, diversity and inclusion, limited attention has been paid to employee well-being and resilience in the Asian context. Yet, this is where the level of work intensity is high, particularly in countries such as Japan, Korea, China and India, as noted earlier. As a consequence, there are many research questions that can be explored (see Table 1 for example).

Indeed, the recent pandemic, COVID-19, which arrived in late 2019 without much warning, has shaken the whole world in unprecedented ways. Almost overnight, organizations were required to re-tool their organizational structures and processes, and come up with alternative models of work. Where possible, employees were allowed to work from home – universities switched to online classes, consulting firms switched to online consulting from home, and people were struggling to set up their homes for the new reality of working from home (see Zhang & Varma, 2020). However, not all jobs lend themselves to the work-from-home model, and many required workers to continue to go to their workplace. Termed as 'essential workers', individuals who work in hospitals, municipal and city services such as public transport, police, grocery stores, were required to continue to work, even though the likelihood of their getting infected increased substantially.

As Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, and Zimmermann (2020) noted, only about 20% of organizations were actually prepared for such an unprecedented event, and will need to do better. However, as these authors note, COVID-19 is really a people-based crisis, which means both HR departments and individual employees will need to be more resilient. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) will be important sources of organizational support to assist employees going through challenging times and improve their well-being and resilience. Again, a search on the Web of Science reveals very few studies of EAPs in Asian countries. While we are not suggesting that organizations in Asia do not adopt EAPs, the large absence of research on EAPs is not helpful for us to develop insights into how organizations in Asia support, formally and informally, their employees to reduce their stress and other difficulties, and how these supports are characterized within Asian culture.

3.3. Responding to the crises theme: preparation and management

Developing employee resiliency and well-being are important in almost any time, and they are particularly important in preparation for and during major crises, whether those such as global pandemics associated with SARS or COVID-19, or major regional or local climate disasters such as floods, volcanoes, droughts, and industrial accidents, such as explosion of the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India in 1984. Thus, while developing individual employee resilience and well-being is important across many organizational crises, as discussed in 3.2 and reflected in Table 1, there are also many HRM-related issues/actions that are likely to be associated with specific crises that impact organizations and societies, as well as individuals, in unique ways (Milburn, Schuler, & Watson, 1983a, 1983b). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations responded with stay-at-home work restrictions that resulted in employees having to work from home. In turn, this created the need for revised and modified HRM policies and practices for employee evaluation and appraisal and training. This triggered organizational responses such as decentralizing their operations and moving employees out of headquarters, especially if located in large urban areas. This in turn led to organizations revising their compensation policies to better reflect compensation levels associated with the local labour market. But it also offered organizations the opportunity to recruit and select from different labour pools, and in the process, expand their potential labour pool. However, identifying locations, setting up separation operations and safety and health protocols and staffing them can take a significant amount of time. Of course, some organizations had to lay off or furlough current employees. Related to this were decisions to provide for salary continuation, benefit coverage, work-at-home assistance, and establishing testing and tracing procedures.

Although making these adjustments of many HRM policies and practices can be managed as the crisis unfolds, it may be more effective to plan and prepare for the occurrence of various crises (Nunamker, Nunamaker Jr., Weber, & Chen, 1989; Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, Shepherd, & Zhao, 2017). Indeed, a faster response appears to have the potential to save lives and reduce societal impacts such as massive unemployment. Thus, the impact of HRM can be very significant to societies, organizations and individuals (Hutchins & Wang, 2008; Milburn et al., 1983b). To date, there has been limited research on the role of HRM and the function of the HR department in managing crises (e.g., Farndale, Horak, Philips, & Beamond, 2019; Lee, Phan, & Tan, 2003). Given the growing uncertainty in the global economy and public health, uncertainty and crisis in Asian countries presents HRM with considerable challenges as well as opportunities for researchers and practitioners, as nation states and their people, with different capacities and mentalities, respond to these situations.

3.4. Green human resource management (GHRM)

The multiple conditions listed earlier in this article that now face all Asian nations are propelling major resource constraints, environmental challenges, and the need to embrace sustainable development and environmental management (Jabbour & Renwick, 2020; Marquis, Jackson, & Li, 2015; Memon, Ringle, Muenjohn, Cheah, & Ting, 2021; Ren, Tang, & Jackson, 2018). As indicated by Xiao et al. in this SI, researchers on CSR regard sustainable development and environmental management as important components of CSR, but thus far have given relatively modest attention to the HRM aspects of sustainability and corporate social responsibility. The work that has been done concerning the HRM aspects is labelled as GHRM (Jabbour & Renwick, 2020; Memon et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2018).

GHRM is, nevertheless, an important component of the broad theme of CSR and environmental management; it is also unique, because it focuses on HRM policies and practices to stimulate green behavior in an organization's employees in order to create an environmentally sensitive, resource efficient, and socially responsible workplace and company (Jabbour and Renwick, 2020; Memon et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2018). While some research has been conducted on GHRM in China (e.g., Dumont, Shen, & Deng, 2017; Tang, Chen, Jiang, Paille, & Jia, 2018), more work is warranted, not only in China, but throughout Asia. What work has been done suggests that some optimism is warranted for the impact of GHRM on organizational sustainability and environment impact, economic benefits, and employee and social benefits (Bastas & Liyanage, 2019; Ortiz-de-Mandojana, Bansal, & Aragon-Correa, 2019; Song & Xie, 2019). But this body of research also indicates that organizations and countries are likely to have different responses to sustainability and environmental impact, reflecting the importance of the contextual factors such as country culture, industry characteristics, and social and regulatory conditions (Xiao et al., in this SI). Thus, it is possible that different HRM policies and practices to implement a GHRM initiative, such as those related to selection, performance appraisal, compensation and training, are likely to be found in different countries within Asia to foster and facilitate the behaviors consistent with GHRM (Kahn & Ulucak, 2020; Memon et al., 2021).

In addition to exploring the above possible differences in HRM policies and practices, there are many further questions that can be pursued by researchers and practitioners on GHRM in Asia. A sampling of these questions are found in Table 1. In the pursuit of answers to these questions, and the others shown in Table 1, researchers may consider using a variety of theoretical perspectives or frameworks. Equally, given that the majority of GHRM research found in the Chinese context has been using quantitative methods involving hypotheses testing, it is important for future research to adopt a qualitative approach to examine the driving forces for GHRM, the way they are implemented, and employees' reactions to them.

3.5. HRM strategy, business strategy and GTM in MNCs within and from its subsidiaries

3.5.1. HRM strategy and business strategy
Existing research and practice has revealed that MNCs' global HRM strategies, policies, and practices are strongly influenced by

the institutional and cultural context of both the home and host countries, accentuating the persisting differences rather than the convergent trends (e.g., Farndale, Brewster, Ligthart, & Poutsma, 2017). A number of scholars have argued that existing international HRM models primarily developed from the western context have limited utility for MNCs from emerging Asian economies, owing to the different motives of internationalization and evolving institutional contexts (e.g., Kamoche, Chizema, Mellahi, & Newenham-Kahindi, 2012; Zheng, 2013). Equally, HRM strategy, policy, and practice developed by MNCs for the developed economies may not be appropriately applied to the emerging markets without adaptation (e.g., Khan, Wood, Tarba, Rao-Nicholson, & He, 2019). Institutional and cultural factors at various levels are seen as the major barriers to the diffusion of MNCs' HRM globally. As such, institutional constraints restrict the choice of MNCs in terms of business strategies and structures, which forces MNCs to adjust to these constraints in host countries. It has been argued that MNCs from one emerging market entering other emerging markets are able to make quick entry and adaptation to similar institutional conditions and local socio-cultural contexts, given the shared situation of institutional underdevelopment and fluidity (Deng, 2012). In extending this argument, one might propose that MNCs entering from one emerging market to another might be able to adapt their HRM strategy promptly to suit the local needs. But, is this the case for emerging market MNCs in Asia? If so, what may be the driving force? If not, what may be the disincentives or barriers?

Extant research evidence indicates that managing HRM globally is a salient weakness for MNCs from emerging markets, in part due to insufficiencies in their global experience, innovation-centric mindset, and strategic capability (Cooke, Wu, Zhou, Zhong, & Wang, 2018; Thite, 2015). They tend to rely heavily on home-grown talent as expatriates, although there are signs of diversification in employing host country and third country nationals as well as overseas residents of home country origin (e.g., Cooke et al., 2018; Tarique & Schuler, 2018; Tung, 2016). Moreover, emerging market MNCs may find it difficult to send expatriates to other emerging markets or less developed countries, due to language and cultural barriers, living standards, as well as other work and family-related concerns (Cooke et al., 2015). Existing research mainly accentuates the institutional and cultural distances between developed and less developed economies. However, we argue that the institutional, cultural, economic, and other important differences across emerging markets may have been underestimated, and as a result, the challenges to implementing a global HRM strategy may not be sufficiently appreciated.

Indeed, one area that remains under-studied in HRM in Asia is MNCs from emerging economies in this region, despite their growing presence and strength on the global stage (Cooke, Liu, Liu, & Chen, 2019; Thite, Budhwar, & Wilkinson, 2014). The velocity and intensity of globalization – particularly the rise of emerging markets – requires the HRM function to be ever more strategic and global in its role, outlook, and approach (Harvey, Buckley, & Novicevic, 2000). Similarly, with the shift in the global economy towards emerging markets, research on emerging markets will become more prominent and critical (Luo & Zhang, 2016; Meyer & Xin, 2018; Selmer, 2016). Yet, research on business strategy and approaches to HRM strategy, including global talent management of MNCs from emerging economies, especially MNCs from China and India, remains scarce, despite the significance of the two economies in the region and globally (Cooke & Wang, 2019; Vaiman, Sparrow, & Schuler, 2019).

MNCs' international expansions are motivated by various factors, including strategic asset-seeking, resource-seeking, technology-seeking, market-seeking, asset exploitation, economies of scale, and so forth (Cui, Fan, Liu, & Li, 2017; Deng, 2009; Dunning, 1993; Makino, Lau, & Yeh, 2002). However, few studies have examined emerging market MNCs' global business strategy and HRM strategy together to explore the extent to which the latter supports the former. Jackson, Schuler, and Jiang (2014, p. 12) argue, "HRM systems co-evolve along with business strategies." MNCs from emerging economies are relatively young ones that have grown rapidly. Their business strategy may not be well supported by their HRM strategy, in part due to the relatively low priority of HRM compared with other business functions, and in part due to the lack of international exposure and experience (Cooke et al., 2019). Moreover, the respective role of subsidiaries as a strategic part of the MNC's global business strategy may differ within the MNC, with Chinese operations often playing the cash cow role to compensate for the declining profit margins from their counterparts in developed markets (e.g., Xie & Cooke, 2019). Froese, Sutherland, Lee, Liu, and Pan's (2019) critical review of challenges for foreign MNCs operating in China highlighted two challenges related to the business environment: regulatory and cultural challenges; and two management challenges: innovation and HRM.

It is therefore important to examine how, and the extent to which, these MNCs' HRM strategy may co-evolve with their global business strategy, and how MNCs may adopt a differentiated approach in prioritizing their markets and HRM strategy associated with their specific markets. In addition, existing HRM strategy models/architectures suggest that firms should adopt a differentiated approach to classifying groups of employees as well as to HRM practices, in order to optimize the effect and contain costs (Lepak & Snell, 2002; Schuler, Dowling, & De Cieri, 1993). However, research evidence in the MNC context indicates that the pursuit of a cost-oriented model of business strategy still requires a quality-oriented (or high road) HRM strategy to support the former (Xie & Cooke, 2019).

3.5.2. Extending global business strategy and GTM strategy to the subsidiary level

Given the significant talent shortage many firms and developing countries in Asia are facing, research into what GTM strategy emerging market MNCs adopt in and from Asia will be helpful in understanding how talent management may be one of the key HRM challenges for them. Like many HRM research topics, the emerging body of academic literature on GTM is primarily informed by a western perspective, with recent exceptions (e.g., Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Collings & Isichei, 2018; Tarique & Schuler, 2018; Vaiman et al., 2019). These studies provide a broad level analysis and shed light on implications for research and practice (e.g., Collings & Isichei, 2018; Meyer & Xin, 2018). However, few studies exist that adopt a qualitative approach to investigating in-depth GTM strategy and challenges across MNC levels, for instance, headquarters and subsidiaries (Tarique & Schuler, 2018).

An important fact is often neglected, that is, subsidiaries in different geographic locations may play different roles strategically for the MNC (Xie & Cooke, 2019). MNCs may pursue a strategic asset-seeking strategy in certain markets and a market-seeking strategy in

others, and in developing Asian markets they may adopt the added strategy of exploiting a comparatively low-cost labour market/human resources. Accordingly, the priorities, resource allocation and level of control extended from the MNC headquarters to individual subsidiaries may differ, creating challenges for the MNC in GTM and even sub-optimal business outcomes.

This suggests that the MNCs' approach to global business strategy and GTM strategy may have been both a cause of some of the challenges and a barrier to their resolution. Moreover, extant research evidence indicates that centralization in decision making is a key feature of Asian firms, with those in emerging markets in particular following this practice in order to maintain control, in part due to their lack of experience in managing global operations and workforces (Fan, Xia, Zhang, Zhu, & Li, 2016; Thite, 2015). But such an approach may be difficult to implement at the subsidiary level, for institutional, cultural and organizational reasons. There is therefore plenty of scope for more research efforts in this area to explore the GTM strategy of emerging market MNCs in and from Asia to assess the extent to which their global business strategy is supported by their GTM strategy at the subsidiary level (see Table 1 for examples of research questions).

In extending the research of GTM in emerging market MNCs, it is important to examine global business strategy and GTM strategy together at the subsidiary level. Peng, Wang, and Jiang (2008, p. 931) propose "an institution-based view of IB strategy, in combination with industry- and resource-based views." Peng et al. (2008, p. 931) contend that this combined perspective "will not only help sustain a strategy tripod, but also shed significant new light on the most fundamental questions confronting IB," for example, what "drives firm strategy in IB" and what "determines the international success and failure of firms?" Peng et al.'s (2008) model focuses implicitly on the firm level without contemplating the potential differentiating approach of MNCs in their strategic deployment of subsidiaries across different markets. As Luo and Zhang (2016) argue, emerging market MNCs are heterogeneous, and a differentiated approach should be adopted to examine them, both between and within. Similarly, extant research on GTM has rarely been conducted explicitly in the light of global business strategy and at the headquarters and subsidiary levels. Nor has there been research that examines how different global business strategies may underpin approaches to GTM, with varying impacts at the subsidiary level in emerging market MNCs (Tarique & Schuler, 2018).

Meyer and Xin (2018) called for GTM research to adopt an integrated approach of strategic management and HRM strategy, and emphasized the role of institutional factors in emerging market MNCs' international expansion. Meyer and Xin (2018) focused on the *catch-up* internationalization strategy of emerging market MNCs and contemplated implications for their GTM. We hypothesize that where different market opportunities are present, MNCs that pursue a market-seeking internationalization strategy may prioritize, channel organizational resources, and align management strategy to take advantage of their primary markets, while using other less lucrative markets as their secondary markets to be mobilized if necessary. Under such circumstances, a standardized approach to GTM is likely to be adopted, that is designed and works well for the primary markets, without much concern about its utility in other markets. In contrast, MNCs adopting a strategic asset-seeking internationalization strategy, particularly those that expanded through cross-border acquisitions as some internationalising Chinese firms have done, may pay more attention to local markets and develop a tailored business strategy and GTM strategy to maximize the learning opportunities and cultivate strategic capabilities. This is, at least in part, because a *market-seeking strategy* is motivated by external (pull) factors, whereas a *strategic asset-seeking strategy* is driven by internal (push) motivation.

Future research and practice on emerging market MNCs may conduct in-depth case studies to test our postulations and identify more typologies of global business strategies and their responding GTM strategies. This is in line with Luo and Zhang's (2016) argument that emerging market MNCs are heterogeneous in their nature, business environment, strategy and practice, which calls for a differentiated view between and within them.

3.6. Theoretical perspectives for future work in research and practice in HRM in Asia

Institutional and cultural perspectives/theories have been widely used in research on HRM in Asia, as exemplified by the articles in this SI. Increasingly, social exchange theory, multiple stakeholder theory, social identity theory, behavioral theory, resource-based theory, social capital theory, and institutional systems theory have been adopted to frame the studies. However, these theories can be used in more innovative ways in the Asian context in order to draw out the distinctiveness of national and sub-national HRM systems, as described extensively in Jackson et al. (2014) and Jackson, Jiang, and Schuler (2020). Moreover, attribution theory may also be useful: with much research being conducted across several countries/cultures now, it might also be informative to know as much as possible about how respondents from various countries across Asia perceive (make attributions about) the HRM practices and policies they are asked to respond to (Hewett, Sanders, Ostroff, & Nishii, 2019; Xiao & Cooke, 2020).

Finally, a substantial body of international/cross-country comparative research of HRM and IR systems has been engaged with the convergence and divergence debate (e.g., Al Ariss & Sidani, 2016; Baccaro & Howell, 2017; Farndale et al., 2017; Rowley & Benson, 2002; see also Froese et al. in this SI). Researchers argue that the much cited dichotomous convergence-divergence debate in understanding HRM systems in different societal contexts is over-simplistic (Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Cooke, 2015; Chiang, Lemanski, & Birch, 2017; Mayrhofer, Brewster, Morley, & Ledolter, 2011; Zhu & Warner, 2019). In addressing this deficiency, they argue that examining the conditions under which hybrid models are developed in practice in a particular context would be more gainful and theoretically and empirically more informative (e.g., Budhwar, Varma, & Patel, 2016). The growing critique of the oversimplicity of the convergence-divergence discourse stemming from the western context brings to the fore the appropriateness of this perspective in sensitizing HRM and IR systems in non-western economies, and accentuates the need to understand the societal contexts and thought systems of economies underpinned by a collectivist culture, for instance (Zhu & Warner, 2019). The review article by Mishra and Sohani in this SI provide further analysis of the convergence-divergence debate in the Asian context; and the review by Do et al. in this SI offers a helpful list of suggestions in how contexts can be taken into account in advancing HRM and IR research in the Asian

settings across different levels (see also Table 1). We encourage researchers to adopt a more nuanced approach to exploring a range of HRM and IR topics.

4. Conclusion

This introductory article has two purposes: 1) To describe the themes of HRM research and practice in Asia that appear in this SI; and 2) to propose future themes of HRM research and practice in Asia that build on what has been done and what will reflect the rapidly changing environment of the countries in Asia in the near future. The themes selected here, and detailed in Table 1, are those that we think that will become ever more important at the individual, organizational and societal levels going forward, and therefore, warrant more work in both research and practice arenas. Indeed, as all the articles in this special issue emphasize, contexts will become even more critical.

The recent pandemic will impact HRM research and practice in numerous ways. At the individual level, people will have to become more flexible and resilient and open to sudden and unexpected changes. The old ways of doing work and the related stability of a guaranteed income in return for structured hard work will not be guaranteed anymore. An unexpected event like COVID-19 can come along and disrupt people's lives. Some jobs will be gone for ever, some for a long time, some will change in unforeseen ways. In all cases, individuals will need to be open to change, resilient, and prepared to deal with uncertainty.

At the organizational level, the uncertainties associated with unforeseen events like COVID-19 will require flexibility, building up redundancies, and creating systems and processes that can deal with changes at short notice. In addition, organizations will need to invest in infrastructure and allocate resources towards unforeseen events. Helping prepare their employees for the changes that might come, both psychologically and in terms of skills, will be the responsibility of the employer. In countries like China and India, where employees are still mostly considered family, this responsibility will weigh heavy on organizations, many of which have yet to develop their HR capability in crisis management.

At the societal level, major disruptions like COVID-19 can lead to huge chunks of the population suddenly becoming unemployed, as happened in early 2020. In almost all cases, governments, non-governmental organizations, charities, welfare societies, and individuals stepped up to help those affected by the sudden change in employment status. Of course, not everyone could be helped, and many are still struggling as we write this. While there is no way to predict exactly when the next such event might happen or what shape it might take, society will have to be prepared to soften the blow, especially for the weaker sections of society. While this is relevant everywhere, it will be all the more critical in countries like China and India, where large sections of society rely on the government for their livelihood or work in the unorganized sector and are most vulnerable to such catastrophic disruptions.

Indeed, one short-term (and perhaps long-term) outcome of the recent pandemic is that travel has been severely restricted. This means that jobs that cater to travellers, such as in the airline, hospitality, and travel industries have been severely hampered, and even when this crisis is finally over, some of those jobs may never come back. As an example, the cruise industry is likely to be paralyzed for quite some time, as people are going to be scared to be stuck in their cabins on a ship in the middle of an ocean for a long time. This will impact global labour mobility for firms engaged in international businesses.

Similarly, business-related travel is likely to undergo serious reconsideration. Given how fast we learned to conduct meetings and conferences with global teams over the internet, it is going to be difficult to justify national and/or international travel for a one-hour (or even longer) meeting. This is likely to lead to a reversal in the globalization trend that we have witnessed over the last few decades. Indeed, one of the main reasons for the amazing speed at which the virus spread was international travel. It is most likely that organizations are going to reconsider international travel, and restrict it to the bare minimum. This might lead to a reversal of the increasing globalization we have seen for several decades now, and instead lead to a new reality where we might see "a shift from the 'great integration' to the 'great fragmentation'" (Walker, 2020, internet source, n.p.). In other words, nations might become more insular and keep other nations at arm's length, so to say, with considerable impliactions for business and HRM.

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