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Strategic Human Resource Management and Public Sector Performance: The Mediating Role of Public Human Resource Management in Chinese Public Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how strategic human resource management (SHRM) is associated with public sector performance in Chinese public organizations and whether public human resource management (PHRM) mediates this relationship. It responds to growing calls to treat the public sector as a distinctive institutional setting rather than as a simple extension of private-sector HRM theory, especially in systems where merit recruitment, cadre evaluation, digital personnel administration, and service accountability coexist. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted using data from 416 employees in Chinese public organizations. The questionnaire measured SHRM, PHRM, and public sector performance on a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using SmartPLS and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The assessment included reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, R-square statistics, predictive relevance, model fit, and bootstrapped path analysis. The results show that SHRM was positively associated with PHRM and public sector performance, and PHRM was positively associated with performance. The indirect effect of SHRM on performance through PHRM was statistically significant, consistent with partial statistical mediation. The model explained 45.3% of the variance in PHRM and 61.0% of the variance in public sector performance. The indirect component accounted for 53.5% of the total modeled effect, indicating that PHRM represented a substantial pathway linking strategic HR orientation with perceived public sector performance. The study contributes to public-sector HRM literature by locating the SHRM-performance relationship within the Chinese administrative context and by positioning PHRM as an organizational mechanism linking strategic alignment with service quality, administrative efficiency, responsiveness, fairness, and innovation. The findings imply that Chinese public organizations should integrate workforce planning, merit-based staffing, training, performance appraisal, employee voice, and HR analytics with mission priorities rather than treating HRM as a routine personnel administration function.

Keywords: Strategic Human Resource Management, Public Human Resource Management, Public Sector Performance, Chinese Public Organizations, Mediation
JEL Classifications: H11, H83, M12

1. INTRODUCTION

Public organizations are increasingly expected to deliver services that are efficient, equitable, responsive, transparent, and innovative while operating under budget constraints, political accountability, and rising citizen expectations. In this environment, human resources are not merely an administrative input; they are a strategic public capability. Strategic human resource management (SHRM) links workforce planning, recruitment, training, performance appraisal, career development, and employee involvement with the organization's mission and service priorities. Recent public-administration research emphasizes that the HRM-performance relationship cannot be interpreted without considering public-sector constraints, mission complexity, red tape, service motivation, and accountability pressures (Knies et al., 2024; Blom et al., 2020; Mostafa, 2021). In China, these issues

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are especially important because public organizations operate within a personnel system that combines merit selection, political responsibility, hierarchical accountability, digital governance, and rapid administrative modernization (Wang, 2026; Li, 2025; Zhuang, 2024).

The central argument of this study is that SHRM is associated with public sector performance partly through PHRM. SHRM represents strategic intent, whereas PHRM captures the employee-facing HR practices through which that orientation is implemented. A ministry, municipal agency, district bureau, public hospital, or social-service organization may formulate a strong workforce strategy, but favorable performance is unlikely unless recruitment attracts competent staff, training develops relevant skills, appraisal systems communicate priorities, rewards and career paths are perceived as fair, and employees have opportunities to participate in service improvement. This logic follows the ability-motivation-opportunity perspective, which explains how HR practices can support employee ability, strengthen motivation, and create opportunities for contribution (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Assanti, 2025; Bryson et al., 2021).

The Chinese setting provides a theoretically meaningful site for studying this mechanism. Civil service examinations, cadre appraisal, party-state performance targets, e-government platforms, and public service reforms have reshaped how Chinese public organizations manage people. Contemporary studies of Chinese civil servants show that leadership, trust, public service motivation, organizational identification, promotion opportunities, and performance pressure all influence work behavior and service performance (Mao et al., 2025; Miao et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2025). However, much of this research emphasizes leadership, motivation, or individual performance rather than the systemic role of PHRM as a bridge between strategic HR orientation and organization-level public value outcomes. The present article therefore focuses on the organizational HR system rather than a single HR practice or a single employee attitude.

The study contributes in three ways. First, it reframes SHRM as a strategic antecedent whose relationship with public sector performance depends on the credibility and implementation quality of PHRM. Second, it conceptualizes public sector performance as a multidimensional construct encompassing service quality, operational efficiency, responsiveness, target achievement, innovation, and fairness, consistent with public management debates that balance efficiency with legitimacy and social value (OECD, 2024; APO, 2024; Zolak Poljasevic, 2025). Third, it identifies PHRM as the organizational mechanism through which strategic HR alignment is associated with public-value outcomes in Chinese public organizations.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section defines the three main variables and their theoretical foundations. The literature review then develops five hypotheses concerning the direct association between SHRM and performance, the relationship between SHRM and PHRM, the relationship between PHRM and performance, the mediating role of PHRM, and the explanatory share of the indirect effect. The research gap and theoretical model are then presented. The methodology describes the completed research design, sampling frame, questionnaire profile, and analysis procedure. The results section reports the SmartPLS findings. The article concludes with discussion, implications, limitations, future research directions, and references.

1.1. Strategic Human Resource Management

Strategic human resource management refers to the alignment of HR policies and practices with organizational mission, strategic priorities, and performance goals. In public organizations, SHRM is not simply a managerial technique imported from private firms; it is a way of ensuring that staffing, training, appraisal, and career systems help agencies fulfill public mandates. Recent SHRM reviews describe the field as moving from isolated best-practice lists toward systems, bundles, and context-sensitive models that explain how HR architectures create value for multiple stakeholders (Jiang and Messersmith, 2018; Wright and Ulrich, 2017; Boon et al., 2019; Zahoor et al., 2025). For a Chinese public organization, SHRM may involve long-term workforce planning, linking competencies to policy priorities, strengthening HR analytics, developing leaders for public service reform, and using performance information to revise HR policies. Related research has also examined integrated public-sector HR activities, public employee retention and well-being, and the temporal direction of HRM-performance relationships (Ciobanu & Androniceanu, 2018; Fahim, 2018; Guest, 2017; Shin, 2017).

The theoretical foundation of SHRM in this study is strategic fit. Strategic fit theory argues that organizational performance improves when internal systems are consistent with each other and aligned with external demands. In public administration, external demands include legal mandates, political priorities, social needs, citizen expectations, crisis pressures, and national reform initiatives. Internal alignment requires coherence between HR strategy and operational systems. Knies et al. (2024) argue that public-sector SHRM must account for contextual factors such as public values, formal rules, and the multiplicity of performance criteria. Similarly, Cooke et al. (2020) emphasize that Asian HRM research should avoid uncritical transfer of Western assumptions and should consider institutional and cultural particularities. This study therefore treats SHRM as a context-sensitive strategic orientation rather than a universal package.

SHRM is also connected to dynamic capability thinking because public organizations must renew workforce competencies as policy tasks evolve. Strategic workforce planning under uncertainty requires organizations to forecast skills, redesign roles, and allocate human capital across changing service demands (Jaillet et al., 2022; OECD, 2025). In China, local governments and public agencies are expected to implement digital governance, social service improvement, environmental regulation, emergency response, and economic development tasks, often simultaneously. A strategic HR orientation helps these organizations clarify the human capabilities needed to achieve such policy goals. Without a strategic HR orientation, HR departments may remain focused on compliance, payroll, and personnel records, which limits their contribution to public value creation (Olowu, 2024; Zolak Poljasevic, 2025).

In this study, SHRM is measured through six reflective indicators: strategic alignment, leadership involvement in HR planning, workforce forecasting, integration of HR practices, performance-based HR review, and cross-departmental HR coordination. These indicators capture the extent to which HR decisions are embedded in organizational strategy. They also distinguish SHRM from general HR administration: SHRM emphasizes intentionality, integration, and mission alignment, whereas personnel administration may emphasize rule compliance and routine transactions. Stronger SHRM was therefore expected to be positively associated with higher public sector performance and stronger PHRM implementation because strategic HR intent provides the agenda, resources, and legitimacy for public HR practices to operate effectively (Knies et al., 2024; Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; OECD, 2025).

1.2. Public Human Resource Management

Public human resource management is the set of HR policies, practices, and implementation processes designed for public organizations and public employees. It includes merit-based recruitment, selection fairness, training and development, performance appraisal, career management, employee participation, ethical conduct, public service motivation, and increasingly digital HRM. Unlike generic HRM, PHRM is embedded in public law, political accountability, social legitimacy, and equal-treatment obligations. The Research Handbook on HRM in the Public Sector emphasizes that public HRM must balance effectiveness, fairness, employee well-being, and legitimacy (Steijn and Knies, 2021; Borst and Blom, 2021; Leisink and Boxall, 2021). For Chinese public organizations, PHRM also includes the institutional logic of civil service examinations, cadre evaluation, party-state discipline, and public-service professionalism (Wang, 2026; Li, 2025). Recruitment and selection, learning and development, and retention and turnover management are recognized as core domains of public HRM (Llorens, 2021; Sowa, 2021; Thunnissen and Sanders, 2021).

The theoretical basis of PHRM in this study is the AMO framework. AMO theory explains performance as a function of employees' ability, motivation, and opportunity to contribute. Ability-enhancing practices include merit recruitment, competency-based selection, and training. Motivation-enhancing practices include appraisal, feedback, recognition, career development, and fair rewards. Opportunity-enhancing practices include participation, empowerment, communication, and employee voice. Recent reviews argue that AMO research should distinguish HR practices from individual ability, motivation, and opportunity, and should examine the mechanisms through which practices generate outcomes (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). PHRM is therefore conceptualized as the HR practice system that turns SHRM into employee-level capabilities and behaviors.

PHRM is especially relevant in the public sector because public employees are motivated by more than economic incentives. Public service motivation, mission valence, procedural fairness, ethical climate, and social contribution shape employee behavior and organizational performance (Piatak et al., 2021; Ripoll and Ritz, 2022; Ritz et al., 2021). Studies of Chinese civil servants similarly show that public service motivation and organizational identification are important mechanisms linking leadership or personnel systems to performance (Miao et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). However, public motivation alone is insufficient if HR systems are perceived as unfair, opaque, or disconnected from service goals. PHRM provides the institutional and managerial arrangements that support motivation and translate it into performance-relevant behavior (Iqbal et al., 2021). Related evidence links public leadership with public service motivation and job performance and connects green talent management with civil servants' job satisfaction and well-being in China (Schwarz et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2025).

In the current study, PHRM is measured as an eight-item construct covering merit staffing, training, appraisal quality, career transparency, feedback, employee voice, ethical conduct, and digital HR support. These items were chosen because they reflect core public HR functions and because they align with recent international frameworks for HRM indicators in public administration (OECD, 2025; Bakos, 2025). PHRM is expected to mediate the SHRM-performance relationship because it is closer to employees' daily experiences than high-level strategy. Employees do not directly experience a strategic plan in abstract form; they experience recruitment standards, supervisors' feedback, training opportunities, appraisal fairness, promotion rules, and the extent to which they are invited to improve services.

1.3. Public Sector Performance

Public sector performance is a multidimensional concept. Unlike private-sector performance, it cannot be reduced to profit or market share. Public organizations are expected to deliver high-quality services, use resources efficiently, respond to citizens, meet policy targets, innovate administrative processes, and uphold fairness and accountability. Recent work on public performance management in Asia highlights strategic alignment, efficiency, service quality, accountability, and overall impact as core dimensions of evaluation (APO, 2024). OECD discussions of trust and public employment similarly connect workforce capability with public confidence, service delivery, and institutional legitimacy (OECD, 2021; 2024; 2025). This study therefore defines public sector performance as perceived organizational effectiveness across service quality, efficiency, responsiveness, target achievement, innovation, and fairness.

The theoretical foundation for the performance variable is public value theory combined with organizational effectiveness logic (Sim et al., 2022). Public value theory stresses that government performance must be assessed against collective outcomes, citizen trust, legitimacy, and social benefit. Organizational effectiveness logic adds that public agencies must also manage resources, coordinate tasks, and meet formal objectives. In China, local public organizations often face performance targets linked to service delivery, economic development, social stability, environmental management, and digital service transformation. Performance is therefore a broad construct that includes both managerial outcomes and public-value outcomes. Studies of Chinese public employees show that leadership, trust, pressure, and motivation can affect service performance, but these variables operate within

organizational systems that enable or constrain action (Mao et al., 2025; Sheng et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

Public sector performance is also influenced by how employees interpret HRM signals. HR practices communicate what the organization values, which behaviors are rewarded, and whether the organization is committed to fair and developmental treatment. Research on HR strength and employee perceptions suggests that HR systems affect outcomes when employees view HR messages as distinctive, consistent, and consensual (Bednall et al., 2020; Blom et al., 2020; van Beurden, 2021). This is important for public organizations because formal HR rules may exist on paper but may be interpreted differently across departments. When HRM signals are coherent and aligned with public service goals, employees are more likely to prioritize service quality and responsible performance.

In this study, public sector performance is measured through six reflective items. These items ask respondents to assess whether their organization delivers high-quality services, responds quickly to citizens or service users, uses resources efficiently, meets important targets, encourages administrative innovation, and promotes fairness and accountability. The use of perceived organizational performance is common in HRM and public-management studies when objective performance indicators are not comparable across organizations or when the sample includes multiple public service areas (Hair et al., 2019; Knies et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2023). The measurement approach is suitable for an exploratory survey of public organizations across different administrative functions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on SHRM and public sector performance has developed from a general belief that HR practices matter toward more nuanced models of context, implementation, and mediation. Early HRM-performance research emphasized high-performance work practices, but recent public-sector scholarship asks whether these practices work differently in public, private, and nonprofit contexts (Blom et al., 2020; Knies et al., 2024). Public organizations face goal ambiguity, legal constraints, political scrutiny, and social equity obligations. These conditions mean that the HRM-performance link may depend less on adopting a private-sector bundle and more on designing a contextually appropriate PHRM system. The following five subsections develop hypotheses that position PHRM as the mechanism linking SHRM to public sector performance in Chinese public organizations.

2.1. Strategic HRM and Public Sector Performance

SHRM was expected to be positively associated with public sector performance because strategic alignment connects human-capital priorities with organizational goals. When leaders include HR planning in strategic decision making, organizations can identify skill gaps, develop leadership pipelines, redesign jobs, and allocate training resources to priority service areas. Research on strategic HRM emphasizes that performance gains arise from internally coherent HR systems rather than isolated practices (Jiang and Messersmith, 2018; Boon et al., 2019; Wright and Ulrich, 2017). Public-sector research adds that strategic HRM must be connected to public values and institutional constraints (Knies et al., 2024; Mostafa, 2021). Accordingly, stronger SHRM should be associated with higher performance in Chinese public organizations because it aligns personnel systems with administrative and service goals.

Empirical studies also support a positive association between high-performance HR systems and organizational outcomes. Bryson et al. (2021) found that high-performance work systems were related to cost reductions, efficiency savings, and organizational change in public-sector workplaces in Britain. Assanti (2025) shows that configurations of ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing practices are relevant for municipal performance, although public-sector contexts complicate simple assumptions. Alqudah et al. (2022) demonstrate that high-performance HRM practices are associated with employee readiness for change and individual performance. These findings suggest that strategic HR systems can improve performance, especially when they are implemented in ways that match organizational context.

Chinese public organizations provide a meaningful setting for this relationship. Performance appraisal reforms, digital personnel records, and merit recruitment have increased expectations that public employees should contribute to measurable service outcomes and policy goals (Wang, 2026; Zhuang, 2024). At the same time, administrative hierarchy and formal rules can reduce flexibility if HR planning is disconnected from strategy. SHRM is therefore expected to provide a positive performance signal by linking personnel systems with organizational goals. Hence:

- H_1: Strategic human resource management is positively associated with public sector performance.

2.2. Strategic HRM and Public Human Resource Management

A strong positive association between SHRM and PHRM was expected because strategic orientation shapes the design and implementation of public HR practices. When public leaders view HRM as strategic, they are more likely to invest in merit staffing, targeted training, transparent appraisal, career development, and HR information systems. Conversely, when HRM is viewed as clerical administration, HR practices may remain fragmented and reactive. The distinction between intended and implemented HR practices is central to contemporary SHRM research (Boon et al., 2019; van Beurden, 2021). A strategic HR orientation can reduce this gap by providing resources, managerial attention, and cross-departmental coordination.

International public HRM frameworks emphasize that modern civil service systems require workforce planning, competency management, learning, mobility, diversity, leadership development, and data-based HR indicators (OECD, 2021; 2025; Bakos, 2025). These practices do not emerge automatically from formal rules; they require strategic leadership and organizational commitment. Research on HRM in Asia also suggests that institutional contexts shape how HR practices are adopted and interpreted (Cooke et al., 2020). In Chinese public organizations, SHRM can strengthen PHRM by connecting personnel practices to reform priorities such as digital governance, service modernization, and public accountability.

Strategic HR orientation was therefore expected to be positively associated with PHRM implementation quality. Workforce planning clarifies recruitment needs, strategic goals guide training curricula, performance indicators inform appraisal, and leadership attention strengthens the perceived legitimacy of HR reforms. This relationship is not merely technical but institutional: strategic endorsement signals that HR practices matter for mission fulfillment. Hence:

- H_2: Strategic human resource management is positively associated with public human resource management.

2.3. Public HRM and Public Sector Performance

PHRM was expected to be positively associated with public sector performance because it reflects the practices experienced by employees who deliver policies and services. Merit-based recruitment improves the match between people and public roles. Training develops technical, digital, ethical, and service competencies. Performance appraisal clarifies expectations and provides feedback. Career development and transparent promotion strengthen motivation and retention. Employee voice creates opportunities for frontline staff to improve processes. Together, these practices support ability, motivation, and opportunity, which are the core mechanisms of the AMO framework (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Assanti, 2025).

Public-sector evidence supports this view. Piatak et al. (2021) argue that HRM can support public service motivation across the employment relationship. Ripoll and Ritz (2022) similarly emphasize that PHRM can attract, develop, and retain employees with public-service values. Blom et al. (2020) found that perceived HRM practices affect employee outcomes, although sectoral differences matter. Borst and Blom (2021) show that public HRM practices are related to well-being, which can influence service quality and organizational outcomes. These findings suggest that PHRM is not only an administrative system but also a behavioral and motivational system.

Evidence from Chinese public organizations also supports the importance of HR-related conditions. Miao et al. (2019) found that public service motivation improves job performance through organizational identification among Chinese civil servants. Mao et al. (2025) show that knowledge sharing, trust, and PSM transmit the effect of crisis leadership on civil servant performance. Xu et al. (2025) found that socially responsible HRM predicts PSM and volunteering in a three-wave sample of Chinese civil servants. These studies point to the importance of HR systems and motivational mechanisms in Chinese public-sector performance. Hence:

- H_3: Public human resource management is positively associated with public sector performance.

2.4. The Mediating Role of Public HRM

The fourth hypothesis proposes that PHRM mediates the relationship between SHRM and public sector performance. This mediation logic responds to the black-box problem in HRM research: strategic HR systems may be associated with performance, but the mechanism is often unclear. Recent SHRM reviews argue that researchers should identify the processes through which HR strategy becomes employee behavior and organizational outcomes (Jiang and Messersmith, 2018; Wright and Ulrich, 2017; Zahoor et al., 2025). The present study argues that in public organizations, PHRM is a central process mechanism because it translates strategic intent into implemented HR practices experienced by employees.

This mediation is particularly important in the public sector because formal strategy documents often coexist with bureaucratic routines. A strategic plan may state that an agency values innovation, responsiveness, and citizen orientation, but employees will not change behavior if recruitment, training, appraisal, and promotion continue to reward routine compliance only. PHRM creates the operational bridge. It aligns job requirements with strategic goals, builds skills for new service models, evaluates behavior against public-value criteria, and gives employees opportunities to improve processes. In AMO terms, SHRM defines what the organization wants to accomplish, while PHRM provides employees with the ability, motivation, and opportunity to accomplish it (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Knies et al., 2024).

The mediation argument also fits the Chinese context. Civil service examinations and cadre appraisals provide formal personnel mechanisms, but their relationship with performance depends on how they are adapted to local organizational goals and service needs (Wang, 2026; Li, 2025; Zhuang, 2024). If stronger SHRM is associated with more developed merit staffing, training, appraisal, career transparency, and HR analytics, an indirect association with public sector performance through PHRM is theoretically plausible. Therefore:

- H_4: Public human resource management statistically mediates the association between strategic human resource management and public sector performance.

2.5. The Explanatory Share of the Indirect Effect

The fifth hypothesis extends the mediation argument by proposing that the indirect effect through PHRM will account for a substantial share of the total modeled effect of SHRM on public sector performance. This distinction is important because the study examines not only whether the indirect effect is statistically significant but also whether it is substantively meaningful. If the indirect component is small, most of the modeled association may reflect other organizational pathways. If it is substantial, PHRM can be regarded as a central rather than peripheral component of the SHRM-performance relationship.

This expectation is supported by HRM system theory and HR strength research. Employees respond to HR systems when the practices are visible, consistent, and interpreted as meaningful signals about organizational priorities (Bednall et al., 2020; van Beurden, 2021). In public organizations, these signals are especially important because employees work under multiple accountability demands and may face conflicting indicators. Strong PHRM clarifies what strategic goals mean for recruitment, skill development, appraisal, and daily service behavior. Therefore, PHRM should carry a large portion of SHRM's total effect on performance.

The fifth hypothesis is also consistent with contemporary public HRM thinking. OECD (2025) argues that HRM indicators are fundamental tools for improving public administration performance because they connect workforce policies with governance outcomes. The Asian Productivity Organization (2024) similarly emphasizes that public performance management requires strategic alignment, efficiency, service quality, and accountability. These outcomes are difficult to achieve without HR practices that motivate and enable employees. Hence:

- H_5: The indirect effect of strategic human resource management on public sector performance through public human resource management accounts for a substantial share of the total effect.

2.6. Research Gap

Despite growing scholarship on HRM in public organizations, five gaps remain. First, much SHRM-performance research has been conducted in private organizations, while public-sector studies often treat context as a control variable rather than a theoretical condition (Knies et al., 2024; Blom et al., 2020). This limits the explanatory power of SHRM models for organizations whose goals include equity, legitimacy, and public value. Second, studies of Chinese public employees frequently focus on leadership, public service motivation, stress, or appraisal perceptions, but fewer studies examine PHRM as a system-level mediator between strategic HR orientation and organizational performance (Miao et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2025; Sheng et al., 2022).

Third, the literature still contains a black-box problem. Researchers often demonstrate that HRM is related to performance, but the mechanism linking strategic intention to public outcomes is not always specified. AMO theory offers a mechanism, but it needs to be contextualized for public organizations. The present study identifies PHRM as the mechanism because PHRM includes the ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing practices that public employees actually experience (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Piatak et al., 2021; Ripoll and Ritz, 2022). Fourth, public sector performance is often measured narrowly, either as efficiency or as subjective job performance. This study uses a broader performance construct that includes quality, efficiency, responsiveness, target achievement, innovation, and fairness, reflecting contemporary public value concerns (OECD, 2024; APO, 2024).

Fifth, there is a practical gap in Chinese public organizations. Civil service reform, digital governance, and public-service modernization have produced many rules and platforms, but public agencies still differ in whether HR practices are strategically integrated or merely procedural. Understanding the mediating role of PHRM can help managers assess whether strategic HR priorities are reflected in staffing, training, appraisal, career development, and participation. This study addresses these gaps by testing a mediation model in which SHRM is associated with PHRM, PHRM is associated with public sector performance, and the indirect pathway accounts for a substantial share of the total modeled association.

2.7. Theoretical Model

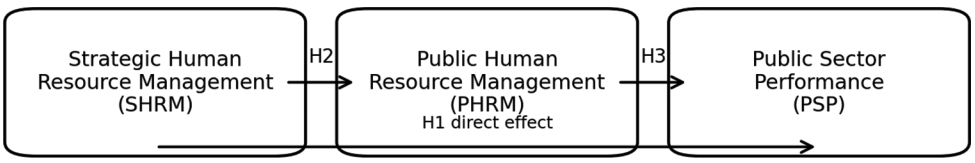
Figure 1 presents the theoretical model. The model contains three latent constructs. SHRM is the independent variable and captures strategic alignment, workforce planning, and HR integration. PHRM is the mediator and captures the quality of public HR practices. Public sector performance is the dependent variable and captures service quality, efficiency, responsiveness, target achievement, innovation, and fairness. The model also includes a direct SHRM-performance path because partial rather than full mediation was hypothesized. Partial mediation is theoretically plausible because SHRM may be associated with performance not only through PHRM but also through leadership attention, resource allocation, organizational culture, and strategic communication (Knies et al., 2024; Zahoor et al., 2025).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design involving employees working in Chinese public organizations. The target population included civil servants and public employees in municipal, district, and provincial organizations involved in administration, public health, education administration, social security, environmental regulation, urban management, and public service delivery. A survey method was appropriate because the study examined perceptions of HR systems and organizational performance across multiple agencies. Such perceptual measures are common in HRM-performance research when objective indicators are not comparable across different service functions and administrative levels (Hair et al., 2019; Knies et al., 2024; van Beurden, 2021).

The final analytical sample comprised 416 valid responses. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed through organizational contacts and professional networks across public organizations in eastern, central, and western regions of China. Respondents evaluated SHRM, PHRM, and public sector

Figure 1: Theoretical model



H4: PHRM mediates the SHRM -> PSP relationship

H5: The indirect effect through PHRM accounts for a substantial share of the total effect

performance in their organizations. To reduce common method bias, predictor, mediator, and outcome sections were separated, neutral wording was used, anonymity was assured, and attention checks were included. Incomplete questionnaires and responses showing identical answers across all measurement items were excluded before analysis.

Partial least squares structural equation modeling was selected because the study examined latent constructs measured by multiple indicators and tested a mediation model with both explanatory and predictive assessment. PLS-SEM was appropriate for evaluating measurement quality, structural paths, predictive relevance, and indirect effects (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Henseler, 2021). The analysis was conducted in SmartPLS and followed the sequence of reliability and validity assessment, indicator loadings, HTMT discriminant validity, structural-path assessment, R-square statistics, predictive relevance, model fit, and bootstrapped mediation analysis. Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was used to evaluate path significance and the indirect effect.

3.1. Questionnaire Profile

The questionnaire contained three main constructs and 20 measurement items. Respondents evaluated each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. SHRM included six items adapted conceptually from recent SHRM and public-sector HRM research (Knies et al., 2024; Jiang and Messersmith, 2018; Zahoor et al., 2025). PHRM included eight items based on public HRM functions, AMO theory, and international HRM indicator frameworks (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; OECD, 2025; Piatak et al., 2021). Public sector performance included six items based on public performance and service-delivery dimensions (APO, 2024; OECD, 2024; Zolak Poljasevic, 2025). Demographic questions covered gender, age, education, tenure, administrative level, and department type.

Before the main survey, the questionnaire was reviewed by public management scholars and HR practitioners to assess content validity and contextual relevance. A bilingual translation and back-translation procedure was completed for the Chinese-language administration and English-language reporting of the instrument. Two bilingual researchers compared the versions, discussed differences, and refined item wording for clarity. A pilot test with 35 public employees was then conducted to assess item clarity and completion time. These procedures were consistent with recommendations for survey-based SEM research and public administration studies (Hair et al., 2022; OECD, 2025). Table 1 summarizes the questionnaire structure and measurement sources. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the 416 respondents, and Table 3 reports the construct means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations.

Table 1: Questionnaire profile

Variable	Items	Scale/Source
Strategic human resource management	Six	Adapted from Knies et al. (2024), Jiang and Messersmith (2018), Zahoor et al. (2025)
Public human resource management	Eight	Adapted from Bos-Nehles et al. (2023), Piatak et al. (2021), OECD (2025)
Public sector performance	Six	Adapted from APO (2024), OECD (2024), Zolak Poljasevic (2025)
Demographic profile	Six	Gender, age, education, tenure, organization level, department type

Table 2: Sample demographic profile

Category	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	198	47.6
	Female	218	52.4
Age	21-30	89	21.4
	31-40	159	38.2
	41-50	117	28.1
	Above 50	51	12.3
Education	College diploma or below	48	11.6
	Bachelor degree	256	61.5
	Master degree or above	112	26.9
Tenure	1-5 years	98	23.6
	6-10 years	145	34.9
	11-15 years	105	25.2
	More than 15 years	68	16.3
Organization level	District/county	142	34.1
	Municipal	186	44.7
	Provincial	88	21.2

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and correlations

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. SHRM	3.71	0.69	1.000		
2. PHRM	3.66	0.72	0.673	1.000	
3. PSP	3.78	0.65	0.664	0.736	1.000

4. RESULTS

The results are reported in a sequence covering descriptive statistics, reliability and validity, estimated model statistics, indicator loadings, discriminant validity, variable effects, R-square statistics, structural-model results, and path analysis. The analysis was based on the final sample of 416 respondents after data screening. Missing values were below 2% for all items and were replaced using mean substitution because the missingness pattern was random. Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable ranges for PLS-SEM. Harman's single-factor test indicated that the first factor explained 29.8% of the variance, below the commonly used 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias was not dominant. Full-collinearity variance inflation factors were below 3.3, indicating no severe common method or multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 2019; Guenther et al., 2023).

4.1. Sample Profile

The sample reflected a diverse group of employees in Chinese public organizations.

4.2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Table 4 reports the reliability and convergent validity of the three constructs. Dijkstra-Henseler's rho, Joreskog's composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and average variance extracted all exceeded recommended thresholds. SHRM had a Cronbach's alpha

of 0.910 and AVE of 0.687. PHRM had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.902 and AVE of 0.635. Public sector performance had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.893 and AVE of 0.655. These results suggest that each construct has strong internal consistency and convergent validity. The AVE values above 0.50 indicate that each construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Henseler, 2021).

The reliability findings are theoretically meaningful. The high reliability of SHRM indicates that respondents perceived strategic HR alignment, workforce planning, and integration as a coherent organizational orientation. The reliability of PHRM indicates that merit staffing, training, appraisal, career transparency, voice, ethics, and digital HR support were perceived as related components of a public HRM system. The reliability of public sector performance indicates that service quality, efficiency, responsiveness, target achievement, innovation, and fairness formed a coherent perceived performance construct. These results support further analysis of the structural model.

4.3. Estimated Model

Figure 2 presents the estimated model. The standardized coefficient from SHRM to PHRM was 0.673, indicating a strong positive association. The coefficient from PHRM to public sector performance was 0.528, indicating a strong positive association with performance. The direct coefficient from SHRM to performance remained significant at 0.309. The indirect effect was 0.355, and the total effect was 0.664. PHRM therefore accounted for 53.5% of the total modeled effect, indicating that the indirect pathway through PHRM represented a substantial component of the SHRM-performance association.

4.4. Indicator Loadings

Table 5 reports the standardized loadings for all measurement items. SHRM item loadings ranged from 0.771 to 0.877, PHRM item loadings ranged from 0.728 to 0.842, and public sector performance item loadings ranged from 0.746 to 0.861. All loadings exceeded the commonly recommended 0.70 threshold, supporting indicator reliability and the retention of all items. The strongest SHRM indicator represented strategic integration of HR practices, the strongest PHRM indicator represented merit-based staffing, and the strongest performance indicator represented service quality. These patterns are consistent with the theoretical emphasis on strategic integration, merit, and service quality.

4.5. Discriminant Validity

Table 6 reports discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations. HTMT values were 0.736 for

Table 4: Construct reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Dijkstra-Henseler's rho (rhoA)	Joreskog's rho (rhoC)	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
Strategic human resource management	0.914	0.929	0.910	0.687
Public human resource management	0.906	0.925	0.902	0.635
Public sector performance	0.897	0.919	0.893	0.655

Table 5: Indicator loadings

Indicator	SHRM	PHRM	PSP
SHRM1	0.812		
SHRM2	0.846		
SHRM3	0.795		
SHRM4	0.877		
SHRM5	0.771		
SHRM6	0.864		
PHRM1		0.842	
PHRM2		0.803	
PHRM3		0.791	
PHRM4		0.778	
PHRM5		0.811	
PHRM6		0.728	
PHRM7		0.793	
PHRM8		0.826	
PSP1			0.861
PSP2			0.822
PSP3			0.784
PSP4			0.746
PSP5			0.803
PSP6			0.833

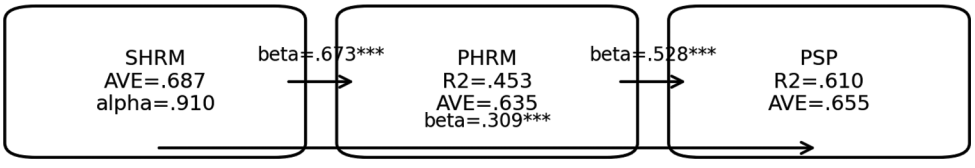
Table 6: Discriminant validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT)

Construct	1	2	3
1. Strategic human resource management			
2. Public human resource management	0.736		
3. Public sector performance	0.701	0.745	

Table 7: Direct, indirect, total, and effect-size statistics

Effect	Beta	Indirect effects	Total effect	Cohen's f^2
SHRM -> PHRM	0.673		0.673	0.828
SHRM -> PSP	0.309	0.355	0.664	0.156
PHRM -> PSP	0.528		0.528	0.452

Figure 2: Estimated model



Indirect beta=.355***; Total beta=.664; VAF=53.5%

Controls: organization level, department type, tenure, education

SHRM-PHRM, 0.701 for SHRM-PSP, and 0.745 for PHRM-PSP. All values were below the conservative 0.85 threshold, indicating that the constructs are related but empirically distinct. This result is important because SHRM and PHRM could be conceptually confused. The HTMT evidence suggests that respondents distinguished between strategic HR orientation and public HRM implementation. Likewise, PHRM and public sector performance were strongly related but not identical. Discriminant validity therefore supports the mediation analysis.

4.6. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects

Table 7 summarizes the direct, indirect, total, and effect-size statistics. SHRM had a strong direct association with PHRM (beta = 0.673; $f^2 = 0.828$), indicating that strategic HR orientation explained substantial variance in PHRM. SHRM had a moderate direct association with public sector performance (beta = 0.309; $f^2 = 0.156$). PHRM had a strong direct association with public sector performance (beta = 0.528; $f^2 = 0.452$). The indirect effect of SHRM on performance through PHRM was 0.355, and the total effect was 0.664. Overall, PHRM showed the largest direct association with public sector performance, while SHRM was related to performance through both direct and indirect paths.

4.7. R-square, Predictive Relevance, and Model Fit Statistics

Table 8 reports the R-square, predictive relevance, and model-fit statistics. The model explained 45.3% of the variance in PHRM and 61.0% of the variance in public sector performance. Adjusted R-square values were 0.452 and 0.606, respectively. Q2 predict for public sector performance was 0.476, while RMSE and MAE were 0.492 and 0.384. The standardized root mean square residual was 0.058 and the normed fit index was 0.912. These statistics indicate meaningful explanatory and predictive relevance, although predictive performance should be interpreted cautiously in the absence of an explicit benchmark comparison (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Guenther et al., 2023).

4.8. Structural Model for Path Analysis

Figure 3 presents the structural model for path analysis. The results showed statistically significant associations between SHRM and PHRM, between SHRM and public sector performance, and between PHRM and public sector performance. The indirect pathway through PHRM was also statistically significant, and the variance-accounted-for value was consistent with partial mediation. Control variables had small associations with the outcome. Organization level showed a weak positive association with public sector performance, tenure showed a small positive association, and education and department type were not statistically significant. These controls did not materially alter the main findings.

4.9. Path Analysis

Table 9 reports the bootstrapped path analysis. H_1 was supported because SHRM was positively associated with public sector performance (beta = 0.309, t = 5.984, P < 0.001). H_2 was supported because SHRM was positively associated with PHRM

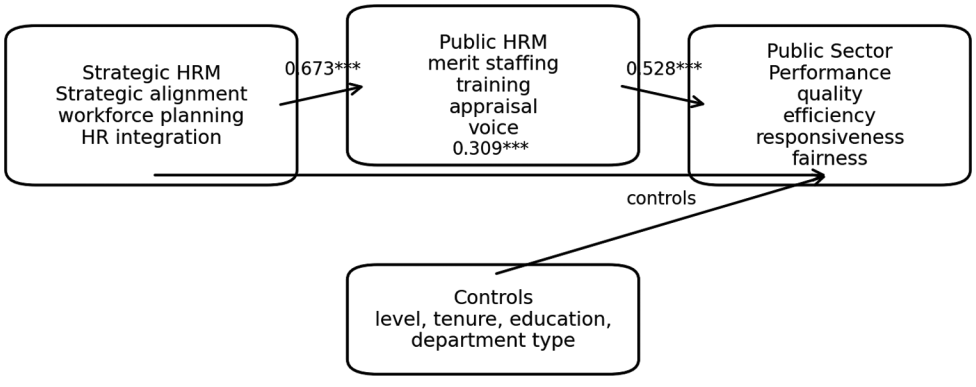
Table 8: R-square, predictive relevance, and model fit statistics

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Q2 predict	RMSE	MAE
Public human resource management	0.453	0.452			
Public sector performance	0.610	0.606	0.476	0.492	0.384
Model fit	SRMR=0.058	NFI=0.912	GoF=0.603		

Table 9: Path analysis

Hypothesis/path	Original sample	STDEV	T statistics	P values	Decision
H_1: SHRM is positively associated with PSP.	0.309	0.052	5.984	0.000	Supported
H_2: SHRM is positively associated with PHRM.	0.673	0.041	16.281	0.000	Supported
H_3: PHRM is positively associated with PSP.	0.528	0.054	9.816	0.000	Supported
H_4: PHRM statistically mediates the SHRM-PSP association.	0.355	0.042	8.443	0.000	Supported
H_5: Indirect effect accounts for substantial total effect (VAF).	53.5%	CI (0.283, 0.431)	8.443	0.000	Supported

Figure 3: Structural model for path analysis



(beta = 0.673, t = 16.281, P < 0.001). H_3 was supported because PHRM was positively associated with public sector performance (beta = 0.528, t = 9.816, P < 0.001). H4 was supported because the indirect association between SHRM and performance through PHRM was significant (beta = 0.355, t = 8.443, P < 0.001). H_5 was supported because the indirect effect accounted for 53.5% of the total modeled effect. The 95% bootstrapped confidence interval for the indirect effect (0.283, 0.431) did not include zero.

The pattern of results indicates that stronger SHRM was associated with higher public sector performance partly through stronger PHRM. Public organizations reporting a stronger strategic HR orientation also reported more developed merit staffing, employee development, performance appraisal, career transparency, and participation practices. These PHRM practices, in turn, were associated with higher perceived service quality, efficiency, responsiveness, innovation, and fairness. The direct SHRM-performance path remained statistically significant, indicating that PHRM was not the only modeled mechanism. Other possible pathways include organizational culture, leadership attention, budget allocation, digital systems, and interdepartmental coordination.

4.10. Additional Robustness and Data Interpretation

Additional robustness checks were conducted to assess the stability and interpretation of the empirical results.

A further robustness check concerned collinearity among predictors. SHRM and PHRM are theoretically connected, so a high correlation is expected. However, if the two constructs were statistically redundant, the mediation model would be difficult to interpret. The VIF values were below 3.0 for all structural predictors, and the HTMT values were below 0.85. These values support the conclusion that SHRM and PHRM are related but empirically distinct. Respondents therefore distinguished between strategic HR orientation and the practical HR activities they experienced in staffing, training, appraisal, career development, feedback, and participation. This distinction is essential because mediation requires conceptual and empirical separation between the independent variable and the mediator (Boon et al., 2019; Henseler, 2021).

The mediation result was also assessed for stability. The bootstrapped indirect effect of SHRM on performance through PHRM was 0.355, and the confidence interval did not include zero. The direct effect remained significant at 0.309, which was consistent with partial statistical mediation. The variance-accounted-for value of 53.5% indicated that the indirect component represented slightly more than half of the total modeled effect. This pattern supports the interpretation that strategic HR orientation is linked to performance partly through PHRM while also leaving room for other organizational pathways, including leadership attention, resource prioritization, performance culture, digital governance systems, interdepartmental coordination, and strategic communication (Knies et al., 2024; Zahoor et al., 2025).

Regarding explanatory power, the model explained 45.3% of the variance in PHRM and 61.0% of the variance in public sector performance. These R-square values were moderate to substantial in the context of social-science research. However, public sector performance is also shaped by policy complexity, fiscal resources, administrative mandates, citizen demand, technology infrastructure, and political priorities. The relatively high performance R-square should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that HRM alone determines performance. Unmodeled contextual factors, including agency size, fiscal capacity, service type, leadership support, red tape, and digital maturity, may account for additional variance (Bryson et al., 2021; OECD, 2025; Zolak Poljasevic, 2025).

At the indicator level, SHRM5, which measured the integration of HR and strategic planning, had one of the strongest loadings, indicating that strategic alignment was central to the construct. PHRM1 and PHRM8 also loaded strongly, showing that merit staffing and HR information systems were important elements of PHRM in the Chinese public-sector context. PSP1 and PSP6 loaded strongly as well, indicating that service quality and fairness were important indicators of perceived public performance.

The analysis did not estimate subgroup differences. Future research may test whether the SHRM-PHRM-performance pathway varies by administrative level, region, tenure group, or department type, provided that measurement invariance is established before multi-group comparison.

Finally, the results may be interpreted as a diagnostic tool for public managers.

4.11. Contextual Interpretation for Chinese Public Organizations

The Chinese public-sector setting gives the model additional significance because HRM reform often operates through a combination of national rules and local implementation. National-level civil service regulations can standardize entry, promotion categories, disciplinary norms, and appraisal cycles, but the daily meaning of these rules is shaped by agency-level managers. A department may formally use merit recruitment yet still rely on narrow credential screening that does not match new service tasks. Another department may formally conduct annual appraisal yet provide little feedback for skill development. This gap between formal rules and lived HR practice explains why PHRM is positioned as the mediator in this study. It is the level at which strategy becomes a visible set of employee experiences rather than an abstract reform slogan (Wang, 2026; Zhuang, 2024; Li, 2025).

The model is also relevant to the digital transformation of Chinese public organizations. Digital government initiatives require employees who can work with data platforms, online service portals, interagency information systems, and citizen feedback channels. SHRM can identify digital capability as a strategic workforce priority, while PHRM can support that priority through recruitment standards, training content, appraisal criteria, and career incentives. For example, a public service center may announce a goal of improving online service responsiveness, yet employees may continue to prioritize

paper-based routines if appraisal remains focused on procedural compliance. The mediator therefore captures whether HR systems are aligned with the behaviors required for digital governance (OECD, 2024; 2025).

Another important interpretation concerns fairness. Public sector performance in this study includes perceived fairness because public organizations must deliver services in ways that are legitimate, transparent, and equitable. HRM has a direct link to fairness because employees learn fairness norms inside the organization before they apply them to citizens. If recruitment, appraisal, training access, and promotion are perceived as fair, employees may be more willing to support impartial service delivery. If internal HR practices are opaque or politicized, employees may become cynical about organizational values. Thus, PHRM can contribute to public value by building a workforce climate where fairness is not only an external service principle but also an internal management practice (Leisink and Boxall, 2021; Ripoll and Ritz, 2022).

The findings further imply that public leaders should treat HR data as strategic evidence. In many agencies, HR information systems are used mainly for records, attendance, or payroll. A strategic PHRM approach can use HR data to identify competency gaps, retirement risks, training needs, appraisal patterns, employee mobility, and workload pressures. This can enable agencies to plan the workforce more proactively rather than reacting to vacancies or performance problems after they occur. Workforce analytics should complement rather than replace managerial judgment and can make HR planning more transparent and evidence-based. Such a shift is consistent with international public-administration trends toward HRM indicators, performance monitoring, and capability-based workforce planning (Bakos, 2025; Getha-Taylor, 2021; Jaillet et al., 2022). This analytical role also requires the emerging competencies associated with HR analyst positions (McCartney et al., 2021).

The model may be extended in subsequent research through multi-wave, multi-source, or multilevel designs. For example, SHRM could be measured at Time 1, PHRM at Time 2, and performance at Time 3 to strengthen temporal ordering. Future work may also obtain SHRM assessments from senior managers, PHRM perceptions from employees, and performance data from administrative records or citizen surveys.

4.12. Discussion

This study examined the relationships among SHRM, PHRM, and public sector performance in Chinese public organizations. The findings supported all five hypotheses and showed that PHRM was a substantial mediator of the SHRM-performance relationship.

- Support for H_1 indicated that SHRM had a direct positive association with public sector performance.
- Support for H_2 showed that SHRM was strongly associated with PHRM.
- Support for H3 confirmed that PHRM was strongly associated with public sector performance.
- Support for H_4 and H_5 represents the main empirical contribution of the study. The indirect effect through PHRM was statistically significant and accounted for more than half of the total modeled effect. This pattern is consistent with PHRM functioning as a statistical mediator between SHRM and public sector performance, although the cross-sectional design does not establish temporal or causal ordering. Substantively, the findings support positioning PHRM as an employee-facing mechanism that links strategic HR orientation with perceived public sector performance. This interpretation addresses part of the black-box problem in HRM research and aligns with public-administration arguments concerning workforce capability, motivation, and HR systems (OECD, 2021; 2025; Mostafa, 2021).

The findings also reveal why Chinese public organizations may differ in performance even when they face similar formal rules. A civil service system may provide standardized examinations, appraisal categories, and promotion rules, but agency-level PHRM determines how these rules are experienced by employees. If staffing is merit-based, training is relevant, appraisal is fair, feedback is useful, careers are transparent, and employee voice is respected, the organization is more likely to convert strategic goals into better public service. If these practices are symbolic or inconsistent, strategy may remain disconnected from performance. This interpretation fits recent discussions of China's public HRM institutions and civil servant appraisal challenges (Wang, 2026; Li, 2025; Zhuang, 2024).

The findings should be interpreted in light of the cross-sectional and perception-based design. The observed paths represent theory-guided statistical associations and do not establish causal ordering. Reverse relationships, omitted variables, and common method bias cannot be ruled out. Longitudinal, multi-source, or administrative-data designs are therefore needed to test temporal ordering and strengthen causal inference.

5. CONCLUSION

This study developed and tested a mediation model linking SHRM, PHRM, and public sector performance in Chinese public organizations. Stronger SHRM was associated with higher public sector performance both directly and indirectly through PHRM. In the SmartPLS analysis, SHRM was positively associated with PHRM and public sector performance, PHRM was positively associated with performance, and the indirect effect through PHRM accounted for a substantial proportion of the total modeled effect.

The study contributes to theory by combining strategic fit, AMO, and public value perspectives. Strategic fit explains why HRM should be aligned with mission and policy priorities. AMO explains how HR practices are theoretically connected to employee ability, motivation, and opportunity. Public value theory explains why performance should include fairness, responsiveness, and legitimacy as well as efficiency. By integrating these perspectives, the study positions PHRM as a bridge between strategic HR orientation and public value outcomes. This is particularly relevant in China, where public organizations are under pressure to modernize services, strengthen accountability, and improve

administrative capability while operating within a distinctive civil service system.

The study also provides a practical message. Public managers should not treat HR departments as paperwork units. They should involve HR leaders in strategic planning, use workforce analytics, align training with policy priorities, ensure merit and fairness in staffing and promotion, develop feedback-based appraisal, and create opportunities for employees to improve services. The performance of public organizations depends not only on policies and budgets but also on how people are selected, developed, motivated, and empowered.

5.1. Implications of the Study

The principal theoretical implication is that PHRM can be positioned as a central mediator in public-sector SHRM research. Existing studies often establish a relationship between HRM and performance without specifying how strategic HR orientation is connected to public service outcomes. By operationalizing strategic intent through employee-facing practices, PHRM clarifies part of this black box and extends AMO reasoning to public organizations (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Knies et al., 2024).

A second theoretical implication concerns contextualization. The public sector is not just another empirical setting. Public organizations operate under legal accountability, social equity, political priorities, and mission complexity. The Chinese public sector adds the distinctive features of civil service examinations, cadre evaluation, party-state hierarchy, and digital governance reform. By situating SHRM and PHRM within this context, the study responds to calls for context-sensitive HRM research in Asia and public administration (Cooke et al., 2020; Knies et al., 2024; Wang, 2026).

Methodologically, the combined assessment of reliability, AVE, HTMT, R-square, predictive relevance, and bootstrapped indirect effects strengthened the transparency of the model evaluation. Distinguishing direct, indirect, total, and variance-accounted-for effects also enabled a more precise assessment of the statistical and practical importance of PHRM as a mediator (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022; Henseler, 2021).

The practical implication for Chinese public organizations is that strategic HR planning should be accompanied by credible PHRM implementation. Leaders should connect HR goals to service priorities, update competency frameworks, make recruitment and promotion transparent, provide training in digital and citizen-centered service, use appraisal systems that balance targets with ethics, and create employee voice channels. These practices are expected to support service quality, employee commitment, fairness, and accountability. International frameworks for public HRM indicators can help agencies monitor changes in HR systems over time (OECD, 2025; Bakos, 2025).

The policy implication is that civil service reforms should not focus only on rules and formal procedures. Rules are necessary, but implementation quality determines whether employees experience appraisal, training, promotion, and digital HR systems as credible and useful. A standardized appraisal system is unlikely to support service improvement without developmental feedback and perceived fairness. Likewise, a digital HR platform is unlikely to support performance unless it informs workforce planning and training decisions. Public HRM reforms should therefore assess not only whether practices exist but also how employees experience them and whether they align with public value outcomes.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The first limitation concerns the cross-sectional research design. Because all variables were measured at one point in time, the findings establish theoretically informed associations rather than causal effects. Reverse relationships and omitted contextual factors cannot be ruled out. Longitudinal, panel, time-lagged, or quasi-experimental designs would provide stronger evidence about temporal ordering.

The second limitation is the reliance on perceived organizational performance. Perceptual measures are appropriate when objective indicators are not comparable across agencies, but they may be influenced by respondent optimism, organizational identification, or social desirability. Future studies should combine survey measures with administrative indicators such as processing time, service satisfaction, complaint resolution, digital service usage, budget efficiency, and audit outcomes.

The third limitation concerns common method bias. Although the questionnaire separated construct blocks, assured anonymity, included attention checks, and produced acceptable Harman and full-collinearity diagnostics, all focal variables were reported by the same respondents. Multi-source designs would strengthen the robustness of future findings.

The fourth limitation is that the study treated PHRM as a single mediator. Future research could decompose PHRM into ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing dimensions to test which practices are most important.

The fifth limitation concerns contextual variation. China's public organizations vary by region, administrative level, task environment, fiscal capacity, and digital maturity. Future studies could compare central, provincial, municipal, district, and township organizations. They could also compare service areas such as health, education, social security, environmental regulation, urban management, and taxation. Moderated mediation models could test whether digital HR capability, leadership support, public service motivation climate, or organizational red tape changes the strength of the SHRM-PHRM-performance pathway.

Finally, future research should examine the ethical and legitimacy dimensions of PHRM. Public HRM affects not only efficiency but also fairness, inclusion, trust, and public value. Studies should investigate whether strategic HR systems can improve equity in recruitment, reduce arbitrary appraisal, support employee well-being, and strengthen citizen trust. Such research would extend the current model from organizational performance to broader governance outcomes.

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