



Deficiencies in Human Resource Management of Agricultural Enterprises and Countermeasures

A Qualitative Study Based on Key Enterprises in Guangzhou

Yu-Shen Fang ¹ and Li-Chun Fang ^{2,*}

¹Economics and Management College of Zhaoqing University, China; fang.yushen@qq.com

²National Kaohsiung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan; lcfang@nukst.edu.tw

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of global trends toward smart, intensive, and sustainable agriculture and China’s rural revitalization and food-security strategies, this study highlights a significant gap between agricultural enterprises’ internal management systems—particularly human resource management (HRM)—and the rapid advancement of technology and macro-level policy support. Using a case-study approach, we selected five major agricultural enterprises in Guangzhou and triangulated data from semi-structured interviews, corporate documents, and secondary sources, then conducted within-case and cross-case comparative analyses. The study identifies four interrelated structural problems: institutional-system deficiencies leading to “institutional suspension”; an organizational culture that is superficial and disconnected from management, resulting in “ideational suspension”; inadequate and untargeted training systems; and dysfunctional compensation and incentive mechanisms that hinder talent retention. These issues collectively constrain enterprises’ transformation and upgrading. We propose an integrated “Dual-Suspension” analytical framework that combines institutional theory, organizational culture theory, and strategic HRM to explain the mechanisms underlying these HRM problems. Results show a positive correlation between HRM maturity—across three stages (transactional management, institutional construction, and strategic partnership)—and organizational adaptability and performance. Recommendations focus on four areas: strengthening strategic HRM; deepening integration of culture and systems; developing a precise, tiered training system; and optimizing compensation and incentive mechanisms.

Keywords: Agricultural enterprises; Case study; Human resource management; Management optimization countermeasures; Structural contradictions

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Amid the global trend toward intelligent, intensive, and sustainable agriculture, China's agricultural sector is undergoing a profound transformation from traditional production models to modern operational systems. This transition is not only an inevitable step in industrial development but also a crucial measure for addressing national food security strategies and rural revitalization policies (Zhang et al., 2023). As a pioneering region in China's economic development, agricultural enterprises in Guangzhou bear a dual mission: ensuring the security of urban agricultural product supply while leading the regional transformation toward agricultural modernization (Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

However, during this transformation process, a significant developmental gap has emerged between the internal management systems of agricultural enterprises, particularly their Human Resource Management (HRM) systems, and the rapidly advancing technological innovations and macro-level policy support. This contradiction has become a core bottleneck that constrains agribusinesses from achieving high-quality development, primarily manifested across the following four dimensions:

Firstly, a notable phenomenon of "institutional suspension" exists at the policy implementation level. Although central and local governments have promulgated numerous policy measures to support agribusiness development (General Office of the State Council, 2023; Tianhe District Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2024), these policies predominantly focus on top-level design and exhibit significant limitations when translated into specific management solutions at the enterprise level. This structural misalignment between policy supply and actual enterprise needs hinders the effective realization of policy benefits (Tan & Ou, 2024).

Secondly, the human resource market presents a severe "dual structural contradiction." Quantitatively, accelerated urbanization leads to a continuous outflow of young labor, forcing agribusinesses to confront the dual challenges of "quantitative shortage" and "aging structure" within their grassroots workforce (Peng, 2024). Qualitatively, this manifests as a profound "skills mismatch" problem—a structural disconnection between the existing skills of the workforce and the new demands of modern agriculture for digital technology, precision management, and marketing (World Bank, 2020). Data from China's Third National Agricultural Census indicates that individuals with junior high school education or lower account for up to 89.6% of the agricultural workforce (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017), a human capital structure characteristic that further exacerbates the transformation difficulties faced by agribusinesses.

Thirdly, there is a significant "adaptability dilemma" between international experience and local practice. The Food and Agriculture Organization emphasizes that addressing the digital agriculture transformation requires establishing a "strategic workforce planning" system (FAO, 2025). However, Chinese agribusinesses generally face

constraints due to insufficient depth in industry-academia integration, with only about 30% of enterprises establishing deep cooperative relationships with universities (Fang & Shi, 2025), which limits the effective introduction of advanced management experience.

Fourthly, academic research exhibits a noticeable "micro-empirical gap." Existing literature predominantly concentrates on technological innovation and macro-policy analysis (Jiang & Zhao, 2023), while empirical research targeting the HRM systems of agribusinesses at the micro-level remains relatively scarce, resulting in theoretical developments that struggle to effectively guide practice.

1.2 Research Motivation

This study is grounded in the following three key motivations:

Firstly, a significant gap exists between policy expectations and enterprise practice. Despite the establishment of a comprehensive policy support system by governments at all levels, the implementation effects and transformation mechanisms of these policies at the enterprise level have not been systematically evaluated (Zhang et al., 2023). Particularly in the field of HRM, the factors hindering the translation of policies into specific management practices urgently require in-depth investigation.

Secondly, the human resource challenges faced by agribusinesses are characterized by complexity and specificity. Against the backdrop of continuously deepening urbanization, agribusinesses need to address not only the problem of insufficient labor quantity but also deeper-level contradictions such as weak professional talent reserves and underdeveloped talent cultivation mechanisms (Peng, 2024). These interrelated problems form a unique structural predicament.

Thirdly, a clear disconnect exists between theoretical research and practical needs. Existing research is overly concentrated on the macro level and lacks in-depth analysis of the micro-management practices of agribusinesses (Jiang & Zhao, 2023). Specifically, case studies on the HRM systems of benchmark enterprises are relatively scarce, making it difficult to generate theoretical outcomes with guiding significance.

1.3 Research Objectives

Based on the aforementioned research background and motivations, this study establishes the following four research objectives:

First, to understand the current state of HRM in Guangzhou agribusinesses. Through qualitative research methods, we will comprehensively investigate the implementation status of sample enterprises in key areas such as human resource planning, training and development, performance management, and compensation incentives, establishing an overall cognitive framework of the characteristics of HRM in agribusinesses.

Second, to analyze the formation mechanisms of HRM problems. From multiple dimensions, including strategic alignment, institutional completeness, and resource

allocation efficiency, we will analyze the causes of HRM problems, revealing the internal connections and interaction pathways among various influencing factors.

Third, to explore the impact mechanisms of HRM on agribusiness development. Through comparative analysis, we will clarify how HRM problems affect enterprises' operational efficiency, innovation capability, and market competitiveness, establishing a correlation model between HRM and organizational performance.

Fourth, to propose optimization strategies for HRM in agribusinesses. Based on the research findings and considering the practical needs of agribusiness transformation and upgrading, we will propose targeted and actionable improvement suggestions, providing systematic practical guidance for agribusinesses to enhance HRM effectiveness.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Human Capital Theory and Its Implications for Agricultural Enterprise HRM

Since its foundation by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), human capital theory has become a core theoretical framework for analyzing economic growth and organizational competitive advantage. The fundamental contribution of this theory lies in establishing the unique value of human capital—the knowledge, skills, and health attributes embodied in laborers—relative to physical capital. Schultz demonstrated the driving role of human capital accumulation in economic development from a macro perspective, whereas Becker constructed a cost-benefit model of human capital investment from the viewpoint of individual decision-making, thereby providing a solid theoretical foundation for the economic logic behind education and training.

Subsequently, the theory has been continuously deepened and expanded. Acemoglu and Autor (2011) define human capital as “the stock of any knowledge or trait that increases a worker’s productivity.” This definition breaks through the limitation of measuring human capital solely by years of formal education, emphasizing the combined influence of multi-dimensional investments such as education quality, on-the-job training, and experiential accumulation. It offers a more nuanced perspective for understanding wage disparities and sources of productivity. In strategic management research, the integration of the Resource-Based View with human capital theory posits that heterogeneous and hard-to-imitate human capital is a source of sustained competitive advantage (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). The differentiated human resource architecture further provides firms with a strategic tool for precise talent management and investment in the context of workforce diversification and skill shortages (Lepak & Snell, 1999).

However, applying human capital theory to agricultural enterprises presents unique and severe challenges. Global evidence indicates that investment in the skills of agricultural workers can significantly enhance productivity (World Bank, 2020), yet agricultural enterprises generally face a dilemma of insufficient investment in human capital. The ongoing digital and intelligent transformation further exacerbates the “skills mismatch”

problem, referring to the structural gap between the existing skills of the labor force and the requirements of modern agricultural technologies (Qorri et al., 2024). Recent studies highlight that human capital development has become a key supporting function for agricultural enterprises seeking to adopt cost-saving and efficiency-enhancing technologies (Muskarim et al., 2024). Moreover, human capital development needs to evolve beyond simple skills training toward an inclusive human capital model that incorporates gender equality, youth empowerment, and community leadership development to support sustainable agricultural development (Kumar et al., 2025; FAO, 2025).

This shift requires agricultural enterprise HRM to move from traditional administrative functions toward strategic workforce planning and talent development (FAO, 2025). Domestic research aligns with this direction, emphasizing the need for a “dual-track model” that simultaneously cultivates professional skills and transferable competencies among agricultural talent (Fang & Shi, 2025) and highlighting the multi-dimensional role of human capital in enhancing agricultural eco-efficiency (Hu et al., 2023).

2.2 The Dual Contextual Challenges and Localization Dilemma of Agricultural Enterprise HRM

Agricultural enterprise HRM practices are deeply embedded within both their industrial specificity and the broader institutional–social context, and thus face dual constraints. The first constraint arises from industry characteristics, including the seasonality of agricultural production, dependence on natural conditions, and relatively long investment return cycles. These features require HRM systems to possess high levels of flexibility and risk-buffering capacity (Boehlje et al., 2011). The second constraint stems from social-structural factors, particularly the segmentation of the labor market under the urban–rural dual structure, which leads to the continuous outflow of young, high-quality labor and results in an aging workforce with a weak skills base in rural areas (Agustina & Rosalia, 2025; World Bank, 2020). The interaction of these two constraints manifests as severe “skills mismatches” and “talent gaps” in agricultural enterprises, especially in developing countries.

In the Chinese context, these challenges are particularly pronounced. On one hand, family-governance models remain prevalent in agricultural enterprises, which must balance intergenerational succession with the requirements of modern management (Liu et al., 2025). On the other hand, the relatively low educational levels and high occupational mobility of frontline workers—combined with the frequent absence of clear career development pathways and systematic training within enterprises—further exacerbate labor turnover (Zhu et al., 2021). More critically, the “industry–academia integration” mechanism intended to bridge the skills gap faces a dilemma of insufficient depth in China: cooperation between industry and universities often remains superficial; talent cultivation in higher education institutions is misaligned with industry needs; and there is a shortage of instructors with substantial industry experience (Fang & Shi, 2025). These limitations hinder the effective implementation of internationally advocated approaches—such as addressing skills challenges through strategic HR planning and educational collaboration

(FAO, 2025)—and result in a localized bottleneck characterized by persistent “disconnection between industry and academia.”

2.3 Towards System Integration: Innovative Practices and Theoretical Insights in Agricultural Enterprise HRM

To address the aforementioned challenges, innovative practices in agricultural enterprise HRM are evolving toward systematization and contextual adaptation. In the domain of performance management and incentives, researchers and practitioners aim to integrate modern management tools, such as the SMART principle and the Balanced Scorecard, with the inherent uncertainties of agricultural production. This has led to the development of dynamic adjustment models, such as “outcome-oriented performance management” (Turner et al., 2023), alongside optimized compensation structures grounded in motivation theories (Zeng, 2025). The core of these practices lies in establishing an effective linkage between performance and compensation to drive the achievement of strategic organizational goals (Šajbidorová et al., 2016).

At the level of human capital development, the classic Ben-Porath (1967) model demonstrates that human capital investment is a dynamic process spanning an individual’s career. Accordingly, agricultural enterprises must move beyond the “one-off training” mindset and build continuous, stage-appropriate learning systems. In practice, strategies such as the “dual-wheel drive” model—which combines industry–university cooperation with internal training (Su et al., 2023)—as well as the utilization of informal educational channels like “field classrooms” and workshops for knowledge transfer (Qorri et al., 2024), have proven effective in addressing the specific characteristics of agricultural workers.

Further innovations involve the deep integration of HRM practices with employee empowerment and well-being. Enhancing engagement and organizational resilience is achieved through participatory management, capability-building initiatives, and inclusive policies that prioritize women and youth (Kumar et al., 2025; Muskarim et al., 2024). Empirical evidence indicates that this modern HRM model, which emphasizes employee development and innovation, exerts a significantly stronger positive impact on productivity compared to traditional models focused primarily on compliance and welfare (Agustina & Rosalia, 2025).

2.4 The “Dual-Suspension” Integrated Analytical Framework

A comprehensive review of existing literature indicates that, although research on agricultural enterprise HRM has achieved notable progress, three interrelated theoretical gaps remain. First, there is a disconnect between macro and micro perspectives. Much of the existing research focuses on macro-level policies or industry trends, while lacking “thick descriptions” of the operational logic and obstacle mechanisms underlying micro-level HRM practices within enterprises (Jiang & Zhao, 2023). Second, there is insufficient contextual adaptation of theory. Many studies apply general HRM theories directly without systematically integrating the distinctive characteristics of the agricultural industry—such as seasonality and production risk—and the specific structure of its workforce,

characterized by aging and low education levels, into the analytical framework (Boehlje et al., 2011). Third, analytical frameworks remain fragmented and static. Existing studies often examine single HRM functional modules (e.g., training or compensation) or provide descriptive accounts, lacking a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of integrating multiple key elements—such as institution, culture, training, and incentives—and revealing their dynamic interactions and mechanisms of systemic failure (Agustina & Rosalia, 2025).

To address these gaps, this study proposes an integrated analytical framework termed “Dual-Suspension,” which aims to bridge the macro–micro and concept–practice divides. This framework comprises two core concepts:

- **Institutional Suspension:** Drawing on the concept of “decoupling” in institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), “institutional suspension” is defined as the phenomenon whereby agricultural enterprises, in adopting external policies and management templates, engage primarily in ceremonial conformity without effectively translating or internalizing these templates into endogenous management capabilities aligned with their developmental stage and operational characteristics. This results in the simultaneous occurrence of “policy idling” and “management failure.”
- **Ideational Suspension:** Refers to the significant disconnection between the organizational culture and values promoted by agricultural enterprises (e.g., “innovation,” “win-win”) and the HRM systems actually implemented (e.g., appraisal, promotion, incentives). In this situation, culture becomes a set of empty slogans, incapable of guiding or shaping employee behavior through institutionalized mechanisms, ultimately undermining organizational cohesion (Schein, 2010; Schneider et al., 2013).

The theoretical positioning of this study is as follows: through qualitative case studies, it seeks to explore the specific manifestations and formation mechanisms of the “dual-suspension” phenomenon in Chinese agricultural enterprises. It further analyzes how HRM subsystems—such as institution, culture, training, and compensation—mutually constrain one another and collectively contribute to systemic failure under the influence of dual-suspension. This framework not only diagnoses the core issues in agricultural enterprise HRM but also provides a conceptual foundation and analytical pathway for transitioning from “administrative management” to “strategic human resource management,” thereby facilitating genuine organizational capability building.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Research Design and Method

To investigate the “how” and “why” underlying the formation mechanisms of HRM issues in Guangzhou’s agricultural enterprises, this study adopts a case study design. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring phenomena within specific organizational

contexts, industry dynamics, and local policy environments that the researcher cannot directly control (Yin, 2018). By analyzing and comparing multiple agricultural enterprise cases, the study aims to capture the contextual information and dynamic processes of HRM practices, thereby achieving a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of the research questions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

To ensure methodological rigor and the credibility of findings, several strategies are employed. First, data triangulation is applied by integrating semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and multiple documentary sources, allowing for cross-verification and corroboration of findings (Patton, 2002). Second, a clear chain of evidence is maintained throughout the research process, ensuring that the logical progression from data collection and analysis to conclusion derivation is transparent and traceable (Yin, 2018). Third, guided by the principles of theoretical sampling and replication, cases with contrasting characteristics are purposefully selected, and cross-case analyses are conducted to enhance the explanatory power and robustness of the conclusions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Research Sample

Data collection followed the principle of constructing an "evidence triangle" (Yin, 2018).

3.2.1 Sampling Rationale

This study employs a combined strategy of purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling. First, the research subjects are limited to key leading agricultural industrialization enterprises at the Guangzhou municipal level or above. This ensures that the sample is representative of the industry in terms of policy responsiveness, technology adoption, and management standardization. Subsequently, guided by the principle of maximum variation, cases exhibiting significant differences across dimensions such as industry type, enterprise size, ownership structure, and the maturity of HRM practices are selected. This strategy maximizes the capture of heterogeneity and complexity in HRM phenomena within agricultural enterprises, laying a solid foundation for subsequent cross-case comparative analysis and theory building (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2.2 Sample Selection and Description

From an initial pool of 15 eligible agricultural enterprises, five were ultimately selected as analytical cases based on the following criteria:

- **Industry Coverage:** The sample spans core sectors of modern agriculture, including livestock and poultry farming, agricultural product processing, agricultural technology services, and crop cultivation. This ensures that the differentiated HRM needs of various business models are reflected.
- **Variation in Size and Governance Structure:** Both large listed companies (e.g., Group A, Dairy B) and medium-sized non-listed companies (e.g., Food C,

Industrial D, Agriculture E) are included to examine the influence of organizational scale and governance models on HRM systems.

- **Representativeness and Comparability of Management Practices:** Each case exhibits unique HRM practices or faces typical challenges in specific areas, such as strategic talent planning or supply chain talent management, providing a rich basis for internal comparison.
- **Data Accessibility and Richness:** Selected enterprises must provide relatively complete publicly available information (e.g., annual reports, ESG reports) and internal documents, and permit on-site interviews to support in-depth data triangulation.

The basic information of the five final sample enterprises is summarized in Table 1.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple channels to construct a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the research phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

3.3.1 Primary Data

Semi-structured Interviews: For each sample enterprise, 1–3 key informants—including HR managers, business department managers, and core technical staff—were interviewed, resulting in a total of 10 interviewees. The interview guide focused on the current status, challenges, strategic alignment, and perceptions of the external environment regarding the four HRM functional modules: planning, training, performance, and compensation. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes on average, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3.2 Secondary Data

Internal Corporate Documents: Relevant internal management documents were collected, including recruitment systems, training manuals, performance appraisal plans, and corporate culture literature.

Public and Archival Materials: Publicly available materials were gathered, such as corporate annual reports, ESG reports, official website information, recruitment platform data (e.g., Zhiyouji), news reports, and national, provincial, and municipal policies, regulations, statistical yearbooks, and census reports related to agriculture and human resources. These materials were used for contextual background analysis and data verification.

3.4 Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis followed the iterative principles of qualitative research, employing a systematic coding procedure to process textual data.

3.4.1 Data Preparation and Anonymized Coding

All interview recordings were transcribed into text. To ensure anonymity and maintain analytical clarity, enterprises and interviewees were assigned codes as follows: enterprises were represented by letters (A–E), and interviewee codes combined the enterprise code, function (HR for human resource managers, BM for business managers, CT for core technical staff), and a serial number (e.g., A-HR-01, B-BM-01, C-CT-01).

3.4.2 Coding and Analysis Process

The coding process drew on thematic analysis and grounded theory techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Corbin & Strauss, 2015):

- **Initial Coding:** Open coding was conducted on all interview transcripts, staying close to the text and using in-vivo codes wherever possible to capture participants' original expressions (Saldana, 2021). For example, the statement "Our talent planning must closely follow the five-year business expansion map" was coded as "A-HR-01_Strategic talent planning aligned with business."
- **Theme Focusing and Categorization:** Based on the initial codes, meaning-related codes were repeatedly compared and merged to form more abstract categories and preliminary themes. For example, codes such as "customized training," "multi-level promotion channels," and "long-term equity incentives" were grouped into the category of "Strategic Human Resource Management Practices."
- **Cross-Case Comparison and Theoretical Abstraction:** Themes and categories derived from individual cases were systematically compared across all five cases to identify patterns, differences, and interconnections. This process facilitated the emergence and refinement of theoretical constructs, such as "institutional suspension" and "ideational suspension," which were continuously tested against the raw data for validation.

3.5 Research Quality and Rigor

Several measures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of this research. First, the research process spanned nearly three months and involved multiple interviews and interactions with the sample enterprises. Establishing relatively stable connections with some organizations facilitated a deeper understanding of the research context and helped reduce potential misunderstandings. Second, triangulation was employed by integrating data from semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, enabling cross-verification of findings from multiple sources. Third, preliminary analytical frameworks and summaries of key findings were shared with certain interviewees to solicit feedback, ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of interpretations. Fourth, coding schemes and analytical ideas were regularly discussed with academic peers, leveraging external scrutiny to minimize researcher bias and enhance analytical validity.

Through these measures, this study not only gathered rich, contextually grounded data but also developed theoretically insightful explanations of the HRM dilemmas encountered by agricultural enterprises in Guangzhou.

4 Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Sample Agricultural Enterprise Characteristics

The five agricultural enterprises selected as research samples exhibit notable differences in resources, organizational capabilities, and management approaches, as summarized in Table 1.

A Group Company: Demonstrates a mature Strategic HRM model. Key characteristics include strategic recruitment planning, well-defined career development paths, and a comprehensive training system. A high proportion of highly educated talent (64.7% with college education or above) and a hierarchical career development system (five levels with a 15-grade promotion mechanism) embody the essence of the Resource-Based View, achieving sustained competitive advantage through heterogeneous human capital. Additionally, a comprehensive digital training platform enhances organizational learning capabilities, providing core competency support for the company's global expansion.

B Dairy Company: Illustrates the intertwined influence of institutional theory and organizational identity. Its strengths include a precise recruitment system, customized training mechanisms, diversified promotion channels, and competitive compensation benefits (Yantang Dairy, 2025a). The dual-track promotion system and differentiated qualification standards reflect institutional normative pressures, while the inheritance of the "Three-Color Values" corporate culture demonstrates the ongoing impact of organizational identity (Guangdong Agricultural Reclamation Information Network, 2024). This dual embeddedness of institutional norms and culture forms a unique path dependency in its HRM.

C Food Company: Showcases an innovative governance model typical of knowledge-intensive organizations. Key practices include systematic talent pipeline development, professional position management, and a comprehensive benefits system. Its high proportion of employees with undergraduate education (57.3%) and equity incentive mechanisms illustrate the synergistic effects of human capital theory and motivation theory. By leveraging diverse recruitment channels and structured position management, the company maintains organizational resilience and adaptability in a rapidly evolving market environment.

D Industrial Company: Serves as a case study in organizational transformation, highlighting a disconnection between formal institutions and informal practices. Although the company established the "Trial Measures for Human Resource Recruitment Management" system with recruitment goals aligned to a sustainable development strategy, limited public data and low transparency at the implementation level hinder the assessment of execution effectiveness. This reflects the challenges faced by traditional agricultural

enterprises in achieving HRM transparency and systematic construction, potentially constraining talent attraction and retention in a competitive labor market.

E Agriculture Company: Embodies the structural characteristics of a lean organization. Limited data on employee education reflects the company's smaller scale and relatively weak HRM foundation. Its "core-periphery" employment model aligns with transaction cost theory but faces challenges, such as insufficient investment in specific human capital and limited organizational knowledge accumulation. While maintaining organizational flexibility, this structure may also restrict the company's capacity for scaled development.

Table 1. Comparison of basic characteristics of sample agribusinesses enterprises

Sample Company	Founding Date	Organizational Form	Registered Capital (10,000 CNY)	Number of Insured Employees (Headquarters/Branches)	Salary Range (1,000 CNY)	Human Capital Characteristics
A Group Company	2004	Listed Joint-Stock Co.	166,374.997	2,262 (970/1,292)	4.5-50.0	Bachelor's: 39.9%, Experience Unlimited: 44.7%
B Dairy Company	2002	Listed Joint-Stock Co.	15,735	1,096 (1,005/91)	4.5-50.0	Education Unlimited: 32.5%, Experience Unlimited: 40%
C Food Company	2006	Non-listed Joint-Stock Co.	73,205.282	4,101 (500/3,601)	3.0-50.0	Bachelor's: 57.3%, Experience 3-5 years: 27.3%
D Industrial Company	1991	Non-listed Joint-Stock Co.	7,000	470 (294/176)	4.5-10.0	Associate Degree: 42.9%, Experience Unlimited: 85.7%
E Agriculture Company	1998	Limited Liability Co.	10,000	8 (8/0)	4.5-6.0	Education Unlimited: 100%, Experience Unlimited: 100%

Note: Data sources are AiQicha (<https://aiqicha.baidu.com/>) and Jobui (<https://www.jobui.com/>), compiled by the researcher.

Based on the analysis of these five enterprises, this study identifies a three-stage evolutionary path for HRM: (1) Transactional Management Stage: Focuses on basic personnel administration and cost control. (2) Institutional Construction Stage: Emphasizes standardizing management systems and processes. (3) Strategic Partner Stage: Prioritizes dynamic alignment of human capital with organizational strategy. This evolutionary path validates the expectations of organizational lifecycle theory and enriches the application of Strategic HRM theory in the agricultural sector. The HRM practices of agricultural enterprises are shaped not only by internal organizational factors but also by the industrial environment and institutional context.

4.2 Cross-Case Comparison: The Association Between HRM Maturity and Organizational Performance

Based on the analysis of the five case enterprises, this study finds that their HRM systems evolve along a continuum, from Transactional Management to Institutional

Construction, and ultimately toward Strategic Partnership. This section explores the inherent connections between different HRM modes and organizational effectiveness, positioning and comparing the cases along two key dimensions: Institutional Systematicity and Strategic Relevance. This comparison both validates core tenets of Strategic Human Resource Management theory and highlights the HRM challenges and opportunities faced by agricultural enterprises at different stages of development.

High Maturity – High Adaptability (Strategic Partnership Type): Exemplified by A Group Company, this enterprise demonstrates a highly integrated HRM system, where HR practices co-evolve with globalization and technological business strategies. For instance, its "Five-Year Talent Plan" is co-developed with business expansion initiatives, and its training system directly addresses the precise skill requirements of emerging business units, such as digital farming. Treating human resources as strategic capital, A Group Company achieves organizational resilience: even amid industry cyclicity, profit per employee continues to grow. This exemplifies the Resource-Based View pathway to sustainable competitive advantage through the development of scarce, heterogeneous, and hard-to-imitate human capital.

Medium-High Maturity – Medium Adaptability (Institutional Construction Type): B Dairy Company and C Food Company fall into this category. Both have moved beyond basic personnel administration, establishing relatively standardized and documented HRM systems (e.g., dual-track promotions, equity incentives), reflecting a clear institutionalization intent aimed at enhancing operational efficiency. However, a notable issue is the insufficient dynamic coupling between HRM systems and enterprise strategy in a competitive, evolving environment. For example, B Dairy Company's compensation and incentive system has remained largely unchanged for years, limiting its ability to drive innovation in response to market pressures. Consequently, these enterprises experience a coexistence of institutional rigidity and strategic lag: their HRM systems prevent transactional chaos but have not fully transitioned from control-oriented to strategy-driven, constraining performance growth.

Low Maturity – Low Adaptability (Transactional Management Type): D Industrial Company and E Agriculture Company exemplify this type. Their HRM activities are predominantly reactive, focusing on basic administrative functions such as recruitment, salary calculation, and payroll disbursement. D Industrial Company has institutional documents but suffers from formalistic implementation and low transparency, while E Agriculture Company relies almost entirely on informal, flexible employment models. Although this cost-control-centered model can function in stable markets, it becomes critically vulnerable under industrial upgrading and digital transformation. Deficiencies manifest as a talent reserve vacuum and inadequate skill iteration, significantly limiting the enterprises' ability to move up the value chain and achieve higher added value.

The cross-case comparison demonstrates a strong positive correlation between the maturity of an agricultural enterprise's HRM system (reflected in institutional systematicity and professionalization) and its strategic alignment with business objectives (reflected in strategic orientation and dynamic adjustment capability), as well as with market

adaptability, innovation output, and long-term financial performance. This finding reinforces the central premise of Strategic HRM theory: an HRM system drives organizational performance only when tightly integrated with organizational strategy (Wright & McMahan, 2011).

Furthermore, the observed performance differentials along the continuum from Transactional Management to Strategic Partnership provide a clear self-diagnostic framework and a reference for stepwise HRM system upgrades. They identify specific directions and critical junctures for transforming HRM from a focus on cost control to strategic value creation, offering actionable insights for agricultural enterprises at different stages of development.

4.3 Deficiencies in the HRM Systems of Agricultural Enterprises

Effective HRM systems should maintain strategic alignment with an organization's developmental stage and business characteristics (Wright & McMahan, 2011). However, this study identified deficiencies in the construction of HRM systems among the sample enterprises. From the perspective of institutional theory, agricultural enterprises in Guangdong Province exhibit significant regional heterogeneity (Tan & Ou, 2024). Although the Guangdong provincial government has promulgated multiple support policies, these policies primarily focus on long-term incentives and directional guidance, showing clear limitations in addressing operational HRM issues at the micro level of enterprises. As a result, a structural gap emerges between policy supply and the practical needs of agricultural enterprises, making internal management innovation a necessary path for breakthroughs.

At the micro level, the sample enterprises face three primary dilemmas. First, imbalanced talent structures have triggered a vicious cycle. For example, in “E Agriculture Company,” extremely high recruitment standards have created a negative loop of “insufficient talent attraction → lowered recruitment standards → diminished training returns.” Second, institutional rigidity has led to an adaptability crisis. The internal control self-assessment report of “B Dairy Company” reveals a static organizational state, indicating insufficient dynamic adjustment capacity (Yantang Dairy, 2024). Third, institutional transplantation has caused systemic adaptation failures. Three sample enterprises have not established a systematic HRM framework; instead, they directly copy the management systems of large enterprises, resulting in structural conflicts with their simplified SME structures and consequently increasing management costs while reducing execution efficiency. Ultimately, these issues manifest as “institutional suspension,” which not only increases organizational transaction costs but also erodes the foundation for sustainable enterprise development.

Among the five sample enterprises, only “A Group Company” and “B Dairy Company” incorporate employee development into their organizational cultures. For most enterprises, cultural construction remains largely symbolic, lacking institutional guarantees and mechanisms that promote behavioral transformation—an issue described as “ideational suspension.” Taking “B Dairy Company” as an example, its operational challenges reflect

the functional deficiencies of its organizational culture in driving innovation and supporting strategic transformation (Shenzhen Business News, 2024). According to organizational behavior theory, organizational culture is a key factor influencing employee commitment and job performance (Schein, 2010). From the perspective of social exchange theory, weaknesses in cultural construction can lead to reduced professional identity, lower levels of organizational commitment, and diminished team collaboration efficiency (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). At a deeper level, the failure to embed cultural values effectively into core HRM processes results in a systematic disconnection between cultural concepts and management practices. Overall, the study reveals significant systemic deficiencies in the organizational cultural construction of the sampled agricultural enterprises.

4.4 Insufficiency of Employee Training in Agricultural Enterprises

Based on human capital theory (Becker, 1964), targeted training is a key pathway to achieving the intensive allocation of human resources. This study finds that the sample enterprises exhibit polarized characteristics in their training development. Only “A Group Company” and “B Dairy Company” have established systematic training systems (Yantang Dairy, 2025a, 2025b), and their system designs align with the core principles of modern training system architecture (Noe, 2016). In contrast, the training practices of the remaining enterprises are fragmented. This differential pattern reflects a structural imbalance in human resource development investment among agricultural enterprises. According to World Bank data, agricultural enterprises in developing countries invest less than 30% of the training resources invested by their counterparts in developed countries—a pattern corroborated by the empirical results of this study (World Bank, 2020).

According to China’s agricultural census data, individuals with a junior high school education or below constitute 89.6% of the agricultural workforce (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). The standardized content of existing training systems fails to match this workforce structure, violating core principles of training transfer theory (Baldwin & Ford, 1988) and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). This mismatch traps training practices in a vicious cycle: content remains disconnected from practice, resulting in low participation, minimal performance improvement, and ultimately low return on investment. These structural deficiencies not only undermine immediate performance outcomes but also weaken organizational knowledge accumulation and continuous learning mechanisms.

4.5 Imperfect Compensation Systems in Agricultural Enterprises

According to Gerhart’s (2022) compensation theory, a sound compensation system should promote organizational development through several pathways: externally competitive compensation levels attract high-quality talent; internally equitable distribution mechanisms stabilize the core workforce; and differentiated incentive schemes help unlock employee potential, ultimately forming a virtuous cycle of “investment → return → development.” However, the compensation systems of the sample enterprises in this study

show significant deviations from this ideal model. Based on survey data from Zhiyouji (2025a-d):

- **A Group Company:** Salary range is 4.5–50K, with 50.1% of positions concentrated in the 6–10K range. The salary increase in 2025 was only 1%. Although the compensation system has undergone optimization, historical structural issues continue to undermine employee motivation (Securities Star, 2025a).
- **B Dairy Company:** Exhibits multiple institutional deficiencies. The salary range is also 4.5–50K, with 80% of positions concentrated in the 6–10K range. Compensation levels in 2025 fell by 10% compared to the previous year. Internal equity issues coexist with limited transparency, making it difficult to attract and retain high-skilled professionals (Securities Star, 2025b).
- **C Food Company:** Salary range is 3–50K, with 46% of positions concentrated in the 6–10K range. Compensation in 2025 declined by 6%. Insufficient salary stability presents a latent risk of core talent loss.
- **D Industrial Company:** Salary range for technical positions is relatively narrow (4.5–10K), with all positions confined to this range. Compensation in 2025 dropped sharply by 21%, severely reducing the retention willingness of professionals.
- **E Agriculture Company:** Has the most limited salary range (4.5–6K), with all positions situated within this low-salary bracket. Compensation for professional roles lacks market competitiveness entirely, becoming a major barrier to the firm's digital transformation.

These findings reveal substantial disparities in compensation management standardization across the sample enterprises. A Group Company has established five core principles aligned with modern compensation management practices; E Agriculture Company suffers from extreme opacity, undermining system legitimacy; and B Dairy Company's compensation framework exhibits static characteristics, having undergone no substantive updates for years (Yantang Dairy, 2025b). Overall, the compensation systems of the five enterprises face a structural contradiction between cost control and talent motivation. They generally adhere to a traditional cost-reduction mindset, viewing compensation expenditure as an operational cost rather than a strategic investment in human capital. Although this approach may reduce explicit labor expenses in the short term, it fails to foster intrinsic motivation and innovation capacity, fundamentally conflicting with the strategic transformation needs of modern agricultural enterprises as they evolve toward knowledge-intensive and innovation-driven development.

First, the linkage mechanism between performance appraisal and compensation is dysfunctional. The absence of a complete performance management cycle, coupled with interference from non-performance factors in appraisal processes, further weakens incentive effectiveness. Second, the underlying philosophy of compensation design is outdated. It overemphasizes short-term economic benefits while neglecting the diverse needs of employees, particularly the insufficient provision of non-economic incentives. Third, the compensation communication mechanism is severely deficient. The formation and implementation of compensation policies lack employee participation, and deviations in the execution of confidential salary practices trigger organizational trust crises, undermining the cooperative climate.

4.6 Theoretical Dialogue and Extended Discussion

This study aims not only to depict the reality of HRM in Guangzhou's agricultural enterprises but also to engage in dialogue with existing theories through its empirical findings. By linking micro-level management practices with macro-level social issues, the study expands both the theoretical connotation and the practical significance of HRM research.

4.6.1 *Dialogue with Classic Organizational Theories: Using "Dual Suspension" as a Bridge*

First, the phenomenon of institutional suspension both corroborates and refines the mechanism of "ceremonial conformity" in institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The findings show that under strong policy directives and normative pressures, agricultural enterprises tend to rapidly adopt formally complete HRM documents to gain legitimacy. However, this adoption often remains at the level of mechanical replication and symbolic compliance, without completing the crucial process of internalization. This results in the coexistence of "policy idling" and "management failure." Such outcomes reveal a complex survival strategy organizations employ when institutional environments conflict with efficiency demands: buffering external pressures by establishing a "suspended" formal structure, while simultaneously creating a decoupling between "saying" and "doing" within the organization.

Second, the cross-case comparative analysis supports the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), highlighting that the heterogeneity of human resources is the true source of competitive advantage (Gao et al., 2016). "Strategic Partnership Type" agricultural enterprises, exemplified by A Group Company, successfully transform generic human capital into heterogeneous human capital that is tightly integrated with specific technological paths and organizational culture through strategic HRM practices. This enables them to build strong competitive barriers. In contrast, enterprises at the "Transactional Management" stage retain only generic human resources and are unable to create unique value. This contrast indicates that the core of agricultural enterprise transformation lies in shifting from passive "compliance logic"—which merely meets external institutional requirements—to proactively investing in and cultivating scarce, inimitable endogenous organizational capabilities.

4.6.2 Rethinking the Myth of Industrial Specificity: From “Whether Needed” to “How to Adapt”

In response to the traditional claim that the characteristics of the agricultural industry—such as seasonality and high risk—render it unsuitable for complex HRM systems, the findings of this study provide strong counter-evidence. It is precisely these industrial characteristics that demand higher, rather than lower, levels of HRM professionalization and contextualization (Boehlje et al., 2011). For instance, seasonal production requires HRM to possess forward-looking workforce planning and flexible labor allocation capabilities, in line with the strategic workforce planning advocated by the FAO (FAO, 2025). Moreover, dual risks arising from natural and market conditions require incentive systems to maintain sufficient flexibility and to link long-cycle, uncertain outcomes with individual contributions—necessitating a dynamic adjustment logic similar to that used in agricultural risk management (Turner et al., 2023).

Therefore, the debate should not remain fixated on “whether agricultural enterprises need modern HRM,” but should shift toward exploring “how to design HRM systems that are adapted to the agricultural context and workforce structure.” For example, agricultural enterprises can draw on outcome-oriented performance management (Turner et al., 2023) to cope with output uncertainty or design differentiated incentive schemes tailored to complex supply chains, as seen in C Food Company. This suggests that innovation in agricultural HRM should not be a simple transplantation of industrial models but a contextualized, creative reconstruction.

4.6.3 Expanding the Value Boundary: HRM as a Social Vehicle for Rural Development and Revitalization

A modernized and inclusive HRM system in agricultural enterprises (Kumar et al., 2025) has significance that extends beyond improving organizational efficiency. By providing stable and dignified employment, establishing skill-based certification and promotion channels, and ensuring fair compensation and benefits, agricultural enterprises can break the vicious cycle of “low skills → low income → low investment in education” in rural areas. In doing so, they become key actors in attracting young talent back to rural communities and promoting rural talent revitalization.

Agricultural enterprises are not merely market-based economic units; they also serve as important social platforms for enhancing regional human capital and fostering inclusive growth. Correspondingly, the role of government should shift from that of a direct resource provider or standard setter to that of a designer of an “incentive-compatible” institutional environment. For instance, by offering training subsidies linked to employee skill improvement and long-term employment, or by establishing public platforms for industry–academia cooperation, the government can translate the macro-level goals of rural revitalization into market signals that encourage agricultural enterprises to invest in long-term human capital. This enables an organic alignment between policy intent and enterprise development willingness.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Based on a qualitative analysis of five agricultural enterprises in Guangzhou, this study identifies the structural contradictions they face in the field of HRM. The main conclusions are as follows:

First, agricultural enterprises encounter four interrelated core HRM problems that collectively lead to systemic dysfunction: (1) Deficiencies in the institutional system, manifested as institutional rigidity, inappropriate institutional transplantation, and gaps in policy implementation, resulting in institutional suspension; (2) Failure of organizational culture, where cultural construction remains superficial and disconnected from management systems, leading to ideational suspension; (3) Inadequate training systems, where training content is severely mismatched with workforce characteristics (e.g., aging demographic structure, low educational attainment) and lacks precision; (4) Dysfunctional compensation incentives, characterized by insufficient external competitiveness and internal fairness, making it difficult to effectively attract, motivate, and retain talent. These structural problems jointly constrain the transformation, upgrading, and high-quality development of agricultural enterprises.

Second, the Dual-Suspension integrated analytical framework proposed in this study effectively reveals the formation mechanisms of HRM problems in agricultural enterprises. Institutional suspension reflects the ceremonial conformity strategies adopted by agricultural enterprises to cope with external policy pressures, resulting in the failure to internalize external institutional templates into effective management practices. Ideational suspension highlights the disconnect between organizational cultural values and actual HRM operations, causing culture to lose its behavioral guiding function. The two forms of suspension reinforce each other and jointly exacerbate the inefficacy of the management system.

Third, the maturity level of an agricultural enterprise's HRM system is positively correlated with its organizational adaptability and performance. The cross-case comparison demonstrates that from the Transactional Management type (e.g., D Industrial Company, E Agriculture Company) to the Institutional Construction type (e.g., B Dairy Company, C Food Company), and further to the Strategic Partnership type (e.g., A Group Company), the strategic alignment and systematic integration of HRM practices progressively increase. Correspondingly, the enterprise's capacity to buffer market fluctuations, drive innovation, and maintain long-term financial stability also strengthens. This observation validates the Resource-Based View, which asserts that heterogeneous and strategically managed human capital constitutes the core source of sustainable competitive advantage.

5.2 Recommendations

To break the "Dual-Suspension" dilemma and construct a modernized HRM system, this study proposes the following countermeasures and suggestions:

Strengthen Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) to Drive Endogenous Institutional Evolution: Agricultural enterprises should transcend transactional management and elevate HRM to a strategic level. HR planning must dynamically align with business strategies (e.g., digitalization, full-industry-chain expansion). When introducing external systems, enterprises should creatively adapt them to their own scale, industry characteristics, and workforce composition to avoid mechanical transplantation. This facilitates a shift from ceremonial conformity to substantive effectiveness.

Deepen the Integration of Culture and Systems to Resolve Ideational Suspension: Corporate culture should be deeply embedded within specific HRM subsystems, including recruitment, promotion, appraisal, and incentives. For example, the cultural value of “innovation” should be operationalized into concrete innovation reward mechanisms and error-tolerance policies; the value of “win-win” should be reflected in profit-sharing plans and transparent career development pathways. Through institutional reinforcement, culture can be transformed from mere slogans into tangible and predictable behavioral guidelines for employees.

Construct a Precision-Based and Tiered Training System: Given the educational and age-related characteristics of agricultural workers, training system design should adhere to the principles of practicality, immediacy, and flexibility. Informal learning formats such as field classrooms, workshops, and mentorship programs should be promoted. At the same time, enterprises should strengthen industry–academia cooperation with vocational colleges and universities to develop order-based training programs and on-the-job degree enhancement pathways that address emerging skill needs in areas such as smart agriculture and modern marketing.

Optimize the Compensation and Incentive Structure to Enhance Internal Equity and External Competitiveness: Compensation system design should strike a balance between market competitiveness and internal fairness (Gerhart, 2022). Enterprises should move beyond a purely fixed-salary model and explore diversified incentive portfolios linked to individual performance, team contributions, and long-term organizational outcomes—such as performance bonuses, project-based profit sharing, and equity or stock option plans. Increasing compensation transparency and strengthening communication can help transform compensation management from a cost-control mechanism into an instrument for human capital investment and value creation.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows:

First, it proposes and validates the Dual-Suspension integrated analytical framework, which organically connects institutional theory, organizational culture theory, and strategic HRM theory. This framework provides a new analytical tool that incorporates both macro and micro perspectives for understanding the systemic failures of HRM in agricultural enterprises.

Second, it enriches the application of SHRM theory within the agricultural industry context. Through cross-case comparison, the study clearly outlines the evolutionary path of HRM from Transactional Management to Strategic Partnership and demonstrates the associated performance implications, thereby contributing to the theoretical debate on whether agricultural enterprises “need” modern HRM and “how” they should adapt it.

Third, it extends the discussion of HRM practices in agricultural enterprises to the broader social domain of rural revitalization. A modernized and inclusive HRM system is not only a source of organizational efficiency; it also serves as a social mechanism for enhancing regional human capital and promoting rural talent revitalization. This broadens the value boundary of HRM research.

5.4 Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are as follows:

For agricultural enterprise operators, it is essential to recognize the strategic value of HRM, invest in its development as a core organizational capability, and resolve the coordination challenges among institutional systems, organizational culture, training, and incentives.

For policymakers, it is important to move beyond high-level policy design and develop more refined and operational policy instruments—such as subsidies for skills training and platforms for industry–academia–research collaboration—and to design incentive-compatible mechanisms that encourage agricultural enterprises to engage in long-term human capital investment.

For educational and training institutions, deeper cooperation with agricultural enterprises is necessary. They should adjust talent cultivation programs based on actual industry needs and jointly develop practical courses and training modules to help bridge existing skill gaps.

5.5 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, although the qualitative case study method enables in-depth analysis, the sample includes only five Guangzhou-based agricultural enterprises, which limits the external validity of the findings. Second, the research subjects are all located in the economically developed city of Guangzhou; therefore, the generalizability of the conclusions to agricultural enterprises in other regions requires further verification. Third, the data largely derive from management interviews and corporate documents, lacking frontline employee perspectives, which may restrict the comprehensiveness of certain insights. Fourth, the study adopts a cross-sectional research design, making it difficult to track the dynamic evolution and long-term effects of HRM systems. Finally, although the proposed Dual-Suspension framework is integrative, the internal causal mechanisms and dynamic relationships among its constituent subsystems warrant deeper exploration and empirical validation in future research.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest.

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