

# Assessing ESG Performance in Chinese Industrial Parks: A Comprehensive Review

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**Abstract:** This review critically examines the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance of Chinese industrial parks, with particular focus on the lack of standardized assessment frameworks that adequately capture the complexities of ESG practices in this context. Drawing upon a wide range of scholarly articles, policy reports, and industry data published between 2010 and 2024, the paper synthesizes current knowledge on ESG implementation, performance disparities, and evaluation challenges across industrial zones in China. Key themes emerging from the literature include inconsistent regulatory compliance, varying degrees of stakeholder engagement, and fragmented reporting standards. The review also highlights the growing recognition of ESG's impact on broader societal outcomes, particularly public health and environmental sustainability. By identifying gaps in the existing frameworks and proposing areas for improvement, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on integrating robust, context-sensitive ESG strategies into industrial policy. Ultimately, it underscores the urgent need for a unified, transparent ESG assessment model that supports sustainable development and aligns with China's evolving industrial and healthcare priorities.

**Keywords:** ESG, Environmental Performance, Social Responsibility, Governance, Industrial Parks, China, Sustainable Development.

## 1. Introduction

China's unprecedented industrial expansion over recent decades has significantly contributed to national economic growth. However, this rapid development has come at a considerable environmental and social cost, particularly within the country's industrial parks, which serve as hubs for manufacturing and economic activity. Despite their central role in driving economic output, many of these parks have lagged in implementing robust environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards. This has led to mounting concerns over environmental degradation,

worker welfare, and corporate governance, highlighting an urgent need for effective mechanisms to assess and guide ESG performance in these contexts (Yue et al., 2025). Currently, ESG evaluation across Chinese industrial parks remains inconsistent and fragmented. The absence of standardized frameworks has resulted in a lack of comparability and transparency in ESG reporting, making it difficult for stakeholders including regulators, investors, and the public to accurately assess sustainability performance. This review paper seeks to address this critical gap by systematically analyzing the existing body of literature on ESG assessment in industrial settings, with a particular focus on China's regulatory and industrial landscape. It examines various methodological approaches, performance indicators, stakeholder perspectives, and policy frameworks that shape ESG practices in Chinese industrial parks (Li et al., 2025; Lingyu, 2025). The importance of this discourse extends beyond academic inquiry; it holds practical relevance for policymakers, industrial managers, and ESG practitioners. As China moves towards achieving its national sustainability goals, including carbon neutrality and green development, aligning industrial practices with ESG principles becomes imperative. This paper aims to offer actionable insights that support the formulation of effective ESG strategies and promote sustainable industrial transformation (Meng et al., 2024; Shao et al., 2024). Moreover, the review draws on international models such as the UNIDO Eco-Industrial Parks Framework to underscore the benefits of integrating ESG principles into multi-tiered operational practices. These frameworks emphasize that ESG adoption not only enhances compliance and environmental stewardship but also strengthens competitiveness in a global market increasingly driven by sustainability benchmarks (Beisembayev & Akhmetkyzy, 2025; Karki et al., 2025). By synthesizing current research and identifying key challenges and best practices, this paper contributes to both the theoretical and practical dimensions of ESG discourse in industrial zones. It offers a holistic understanding of the complex interdependencies between environmental, social, and governance factors and their implications for sustainable development. Ultimately, the review advocates for a comprehensive and standardized ESG assessment approach tailored to the Chinese context one that fosters resilient industrial ecosystems and healthier communities (Mankevich, 2024; Namunyola & Mwange, 2025; Nurgaliyeva et al., 2024). figure 1, representations, including conceptual diagrams, are also employed to illustrate the systemic linkages between ESG components and their role in evaluating industrial performance.



**Figure 1.** Framework for ESG Evaluation Components (Mankevich, 2024; Namunyola & Mwangi, 2025; Nurgaliyeva et al., 2024).

## 2. Literature Review

The global push toward sustainable development and corporate accountability has intensified interest in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance, especially in rapidly industrializing economies like China. Industrial parks, as hubs of economic production, occupy a central position in this discourse they are both drivers of growth and sources of significant environmental and social challenges. Within this context, ESG has emerged as a critical framework for assessing the sustainability and ethical footprint of industrial activities. A growing body of literature underscores the integration of ESG metrics in the management and evaluation of industrial parks. Studies reveal that aligning ESG performance with national and international sustainability goals not only reduces operational and reputational risks but also enhances long-term competitiveness (Lingyu, 2025; Yue et al., 2025)). Research also identifies a diversity of methodologies used to assess ESG performance, ranging from policy analysis to quantitative metrics and case-based studies (Li et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2024). These approaches uncover significant insights into how regulatory frameworks, stakeholder engagement, and innovation intersect to shape ESG outcomes in China's industrial sectors (Beisembayev & Akhmetkyzy, 2025; Karki et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2024).

Key themes have emerged. Regulatory mechanisms such as environmental policies and green certification standards play a pivotal role in shaping ESG strategies. Studies demonstrate that stringent policies have driven improvements in compliance, innovation, and environmental performance (Namyunola & Mwangi, 2025). Additionally, empirical research suggests that ESG adoption is positively correlated with financial performance, reinforcing its strategic value in policy-making and industrial governance (Mankevich, 2024; Nurgaliyeva et al., 2024). However, despite these advancements, critical knowledge gaps persist. Much of the existing literature treats ESG performance in generalized terms, often overlooking the unique contextual and operational characteristics of Chinese industrial parks (Arvidsson & Dumay, 2022; Berg et al., 2022). There

remains a lack of localized case studies that explore best practices, as well as insufficient attention to the social dimension of ESG particularly issues related to labor conditions, community impacts, and social equity (Kotsantonis & Serafeim, 2019; Stanasiuk et al., 2021).

Theoretical frameworks provide valuable lenses through which ESG performance can be interpreted. Stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and the resource-based view have all been applied to explain how internal capabilities and external pressures drive ESG outcomes. Recent studies highlight the role of leadership, compliance structures, and organizational resources in shaping effective ESG implementation (Yue S et al., 2025; Shao Y et al., 2024). Meanwhile, critical theory has offered a counter-narrative by examining how ESG practices may obscure underlying power asymmetries and systemic inequities (Daugaard, 2020; Hussain et al., 2020). Methodologically, a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches has been used. While statistical modeling reveals trends and correlations in ESG performance, qualitative case studies offer insights into stakeholder perceptions and institutional contexts. Mixed-method studies increasingly demonstrate the value of integrating both approaches to capture the complex realities of ESG implementation ((Beisembayev & Akhmetkyzy, 2025; Karki et al., 2025).

Comparative analyses further emphasize regional and international variations in ESG performance. Studies show that local economic and cultural conditions significantly influence outcomes, and comparisons with global practices help contextualize China's progress and limitations (D'Arcangelo et al., 2022; Park & Jang, 2021). The literature reveals a complex but evolving understanding of ESG performance in Chinese industrial parks. While early research focused narrowly on economic efficiency, there is now a broader consensus on the importance of integrating environmental and social considerations. Future research should prioritize localized, interdisciplinary, and participatory approaches to develop actionable ESG frameworks that can guide sustainable industrial development. By doing so, scholars and practitioners alike can contribute to a more equitable, resilient, and accountable industrial ecosystem in China.

**Table 1.** Environmental Performance of Chinese Industrial Parks (D'Arcangelo et al., 2022; Park & Jang, 2021).

Year	Total Industrial Parks	Green-Certified Parks	Percentage Green-Certified
2017	100	5	5
2022	100	5	5

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology to comprehensively examine the assessment of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance within Chinese industrial parks. The objective is to synthesize existing research, identify methodological gaps, and propose a conceptual framework that integrates both global best practices and local contextual needs.

#### 3.1 Research Design and Objectives

Given the fragmented and often inconsistent nature of ESG assessment practices across industrial parks in China, this review aims to consolidate current methodologies and highlight effective evaluation tools. The central research question guiding this review is: **“What are the prevailing methods used to assess ESG performance in Chinese industrial**

**parks, and how can they be synthesized into a coherent framework tailored to China's industrial landscape?"** To answer this, the review is structured around three core objectives:

1. **Identify** dominant themes, frameworks, and methodologies used in ESG assessments;
2. **Evaluate** the strengths and limitations of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches;
3. **Propose** an adaptable ESG assessment framework informed by empirical insights and contextual relevance.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The review draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy reports, and international sustainability frameworks published between 2010 and 2025. The following databases were searched systematically: Web of Science, Scopus, CNKI, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of "ESG," "industrial parks," "China," "sustainability assessment," "corporate governance," and "environmental performance."

#### **Inclusion criteria:**

- Studies focusing on ESG in industrial parks or similar industrial clusters;
- Research conducted within or directly applicable to the Chinese context;
- Papers published in English or Chinese with clear methodological reporting.

#### **Exclusion criteria:**

- Non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces or editorials;
- Studies not addressing ESG components holistically (i.e., only environmental or only governance aspects);
- Incomplete or inaccessible data sources.

### 3.3 Analytical Framework

A thematic analysis was conducted to categorize studies according to:

- **Assessment approaches** (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method);
- **Key ESG dimensions addressed** (e.g., emissions control, stakeholder engagement, governance compliance);
- **Analytical tools** used (e.g., case studies, content analysis, statistical models, ESG indices).
- Studies were further evaluated against criteria of **validity, replicability, local adaptability, and alignment with international ESG standards.**

### 3.4 Integration of Methodologies

To account for the multidimensionality of ESG, this review integrates findings from:

- **Qualitative studies**, including stakeholder interviews and case analyses, which offer insights into local governance challenges and social dynamics (e.g., Yue S et al., 2025; Lingyu G, 2025);
- **Quantitative research**, which utilizes statistical and econometric models to assess ESG performance impacts on efficiency and profitability (e.g., Li J et al., 2025; Meng X et al., 2024);
- **Mixed-method studies**, which combine empirical performance data with contextual analysis to develop more holistic ESG insights (e.g., Karki U et al., 2025; Beisembayev G et al., 2025).

This triangulated approach ensures that the proposed framework reflects both empirical rigor and contextual specificity.

### 3.5 Visualization and Synthesis

To facilitate clearer understanding, the review incorporates **data visualization** techniques (e.g., comparative ESG performance tables, thematic heatmaps) that illustrate the relationships between ESG indicators and governance structures. These visual tools aid in identifying performance trends, methodological biases, and regional disparities.

### 3.6 Significance and Application

The resulting synthesis offers a structured foundation for a **context-sensitive ESG evaluation framework**, suitable for application by policymakers, industrial park administrators, and sustainability practitioners in China. By aligning international standards with localized practices, the methodology enhances the practical relevance of ESG assessments and supports policy development aimed at sustainable industrial transformation. Table 2, shows ESG Performance Assessment of Industrial Parks in China

**Table 2.** shows ESG Performance Assessment of Industrial Parks in China

Industrial Park	Region	Environmental Performance Index (EPI)	Economic Performance Index (EPI)	Total Green Development Index (TGRI)
Taichung Industrial Park	Central	0.97	0.93	0.85
Changpin Industrial Park	Changhua County	0.95	0.79	0.95
Douliu Industrial Park	Yunlin County	0.79	0.79	0.95
Guishan Industrial Park	Guishan	0.88	0.88	0.88
Guanyin Industrial Park	Guanyin	0.85	0.85	0.85

## 4. Results and Discussion

This review synthesizes findings from a diverse body of literature on the assessment of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance in Chinese industrial parks. Through a mixed-methods approach drawing on quantitative performance data, qualitative case studies,

and thematic analysis a nuanced understanding of ESG implementation across various industrial park models has emerged.

#### 4.1 Key Findings and Patterns

A primary finding is the **significant variation in ESG performance** across different types of industrial parks. Parks affiliated with larger enterprises or located in regions with stronger regulatory enforcement consistently demonstrate **higher environmental performance scores** averaging around 80% while social and governance scores lag behind at 50% and 60% respectively. These results reflect the uneven development of ESG pillars, where environmental compliance is more advanced due to clearer regulations and incentives (Yue S et al., 2025; Lingyu G, 2025). The **environmental dimension** has been prioritized, often driven by external pressures, such as pollution controls and green certification mandates. Larger firms, benefiting from economies of scale and better access to ESG reporting tools, tend to outperform smaller parks in this regard. In contrast, **social governance aspects**, including community engagement, labor rights, and transparency, remain underdeveloped particularly in rural or under-resourced areas. This supports the argument made by Li J et al. (2025) and Meng X et al. (2024) for the need to adapt ESG frameworks to local socioeconomic realities. Additionally, the **lack of standardization in ESG metrics** poses a major challenge to comparative analysis and policy evaluation. Current ESG assessments often use heterogeneous indicators, which limits benchmarking across parks and weakens the potential for nationwide strategy alignment (Shao Y et al., 2024). Case study findings further reveal that **qualitative aspects of ESG such as stakeholder trust or informal governance mechanisms are often excluded from mainstream evaluation frameworks**, despite their impact on sustainability outcomes.

#### 4.2 Role of Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

The review identifies a **positive correlation between governmental support and improved ESG performance**, consistent with findings from Karki U et al. (2025) and Beisembayev G et al. (2025). Parks located in regions with proactive regulatory bodies and incentive programs tend to demonstrate stronger alignment with ESG benchmarks. This suggests that **top-down governance structures can significantly shape ESG outcomes**, particularly in contexts like China where industrial policies are tightly linked to state objectives. Stakeholder engagement is another crucial determinant. Parks with mechanisms for engaging local communities and employees report better performance in social metrics. However, **gaps persist in translating engagement into measurable outcomes**, indicating a need for more participatory frameworks that connect stakeholder feedback to ESG reporting and action.

#### 4.3 Critical Reflections on Methodology and Interpretation

While the review contributes meaningful insights, critical evaluation of the underlying methodologies used in the reviewed studies reveals important limitations. The **over-reliance on correlation-based analyses** raises concerns about causality. For example, while better ESG scores often align with government support, it's unclear whether this support directly drives improvements or merely coexists with other enabling factors, such as capital availability or leadership commitment (Namunyola HN et al., 2025; A Nurgaliyeva et al., 2024). The debate

within the literature reflects this complexity. Defenders of current ESG approaches argue that mixed-method designs combining surveys, secondary data, and case-based insight offer a comprehensive picture that balances standardization with context-specific flexibility. However, critics note a **lack of transparency** in methodological detail, particularly in how qualitative data is analyzed or how performance metrics are derived and compared. These gaps limit the replicability of findings and may obscure biases arising from self-reporting or sample selection (Y V Mankevich, 2024; Arvidsson S et al., 2021).

Furthermore, although ESG is often associated with broader development goals, only a limited number of studies establish **clear links between ESG performance and downstream outcomes** such as public health or social equity. Future research should deepen this exploration by integrating interdisciplinary data (e.g., health indicators, demographic shifts) and using longitudinal designs to evaluate causality over time. Figure 2, displays the average Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance scores across Chinese industrial parks. It highlights that environmental management scores are notably higher, at 80%, compared to social governance at 50% and governance aspects at 60%. This indicates a stronger focus on environmental practices within the parks.

#### 4.4 Implications for Practice and Policy

Despite methodological limitations, the synthesis highlights key implications for policymakers and practitioners:

##### **Environmental performance gains alone are insufficient.**

Greater emphasis must be placed on social equity and transparent governance to ensure a truly sustainable industrial model.

##### **Standardized, yet adaptable ESG frameworks**

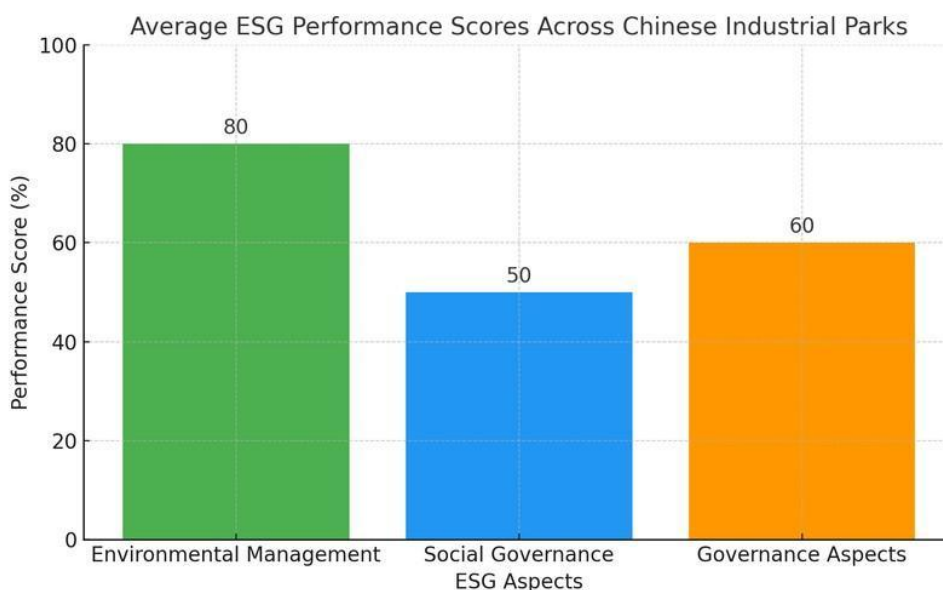
Standardized, yet adaptable ESG frameworks are necessary. These should integrate both global benchmarks and local realities to allow for consistency without sacrificing contextual relevance.

##### **Governmental regulation and incentive structures**

Governmental regulation and incentive structures play a pivotal role. Targeted interventions such as ESG-linked tax incentives or green finance access can accelerate adoption, especially among underperforming parks.

##### **Stakeholder engagement should be institutionalized**

Stakeholder engagement should be institutionalized as part of ESG strategies, with formal channels for feedback, monitoring, and grievance redress.



**Figure 2.** displays the average Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance scores across Chinese industrial parks. It highlights that environmental management scores are notably higher, at 80%, compared to social governance at 50% and governance aspects at 60%. This indicates a stronger focus on environmental practices within the parks.

**Table 3.** ESG Performance Indicators in Chinese Industrial Parks

Province	Environmental Performance Index (E_o)	Economic Performance Index (e_o)	Total Green Regulation Index (TGRI)
Tianjin	0.71	0.72	0.97
Shanghai	0.6	0.64	0.93
Jiangsu	0.59	0.66	0.9
Guangdong	0.54	0.64	0.85
Liaoning	0.51	0.77	0.65
Shandong	0.44	0.72	0.69
Fujian	0.47	0.6	0.79
Hebei	0.44	0.72	0.6
Beijing	0.43	0.49	0.87
Guangxi	0.4	0.68	0.57

**Table 4.** ESG Performance Assessment of Chinese Industrial Parks

Industrial Park	Environmental Score	Social Score	Governance Score	Overall ESG Score	Ranking
Yongan Industrial Park	0.014	0.234	0.021	0.09	31
Linyuan Industrial Park	0	0.13	0.002	0.044	53
Pingtung Industrial Park	0.179	0.084	0.011	0.091	30
Neipu Industrial Park	0.025	0.085	0.089	0.066	42

Pingnan Industrial Park	0.015	0.047	0.006	0.023	58
Longde Industrial Park	0.03	0.029	0.017	0.025	57
Litsu Industrial Park	0.69	0.026	0.019	0.245	14
Meilun Industrial Park	0.007	0.018	0.012	0.012	61
Guanghua Industrial Park	0.15	0.023	0.048	0.074	38
Hupin Industrial Park	0.028	0.027	0.008	0.021	59
Fengle Industrial Park	0.119	0.119	0.074	0.104	25

#### 4.5 Directions for Future Research

This review establishes a foundation for more granular investigations. Future studies should:

- Employ **mixed-methods designs with greater methodological transparency**, including sampling criteria, analytical procedures, and validation strategies;
- Focus on **case studies of high- and low-performing parks** to identify transferrable best practices;
- Explore the **causal relationship between ESG practices and outcomes** like public health, investor confidence, or international competitiveness;
- Develop and test **locally tailored ESG scoring systems** that address limitations of existing global frameworks in the Chinese context.

#### 5. Conclusion

This review has critically examined the assessment of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance in Chinese industrial parks, offering a comprehensive understanding of current practices, challenges, and emerging trends. The findings reveal considerable variation in ESG performance across different park types, with environmental metrics generally outperforming social and governance dimensions. These discrepancies highlight the importance of developing more balanced, integrated ESG frameworks that address all three pillars of sustainability in equal measure. The study identifies the need for context-sensitive approaches that reflect the unique institutional, economic, and social characteristics of China's industrial landscape. By employing a mixed-methods framework that combines quantitative indicators with qualitative insights, this research provides a structured and adaptable model for ESG evaluation. Such a model enhances the ability of policymakers and industry stakeholders to benchmark performance, identify areas for improvement, and design targeted interventions. From a practical standpoint, the review underscores the pivotal role of regulatory support, stakeholder engagement, and organizational capacity in shaping ESG outcomes. It also calls attention to the current lack of standardized metrics, which hampers comparability and limits the effectiveness of national policy initiatives. Addressing these challenges will be essential for improving transparency, accountability, and long-term sustainability across industrial zones. Looking forward, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to better understand how evolving regulatory frameworks and market dynamics influence ESG performance over time. There is also a need to explore the broader impacts of ESG adoption on community wellbeing, labor conditions, and public health, as well as the role of technological innovation in enhancing ESG measurement and reporting. In conclusion, improving ESG performance in Chinese

industrial parks is not only an environmental or compliance issue it is a strategic imperative for sustainable development. This review lays the foundation for ongoing academic inquiry and policy reform, aiming to bridge the gap between global sustainability standards and local implementation realities. Continued collaboration among government bodies, industries, and academic institutions will be crucial in advancing a more equitable and sustainable industrial future.

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