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# Strategic inaction and the limits of green state entrepreneurialism: Urban political ecology of China's Flower Expo

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the 10th China Flower Expo as an emblematic case of green state entrepreneurialism in practice. Promoted as a flagship ecological event to advance Chongming Island's transformation into a “world-class ecological island,” the Expo ultimately functioned less as a vehicle for sustainability transition than as a staged performance of green legitimacy, punctuated by short-term accumulation and long-term deferral. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and an integrated analytical framework that combines green state entrepreneurialism, strategic inaction, and urban political ecology, this study unpacks how ecological discourses are mobilized through mega-events to attract investment, restructure space, and consolidate state authority—while deferring substantive socio-ecological transformation. We argue that the post-Expo stagnation does not simply reflect implementation failure or greenwashing but reveals a deeper logic of risk-averse environmental statecraft. Through symbolic compliance and selective follow-through, the local state maintained the appearance of green commitment while avoiding structural changes. By foregrounding the role of strategic inaction as a mode of governance, this article contributes to critical debates on authoritarian environmentalism and urban sustainability transitions. It highlights how green entrepreneurialism, far from overcoming ecological crises, may entrench uneven socio-environmental outcomes and reproduce the contradictions it claims to resolve.

## Keywords

ecological spectacle, event-led development, green state entrepreneurialism, strategic inaction, urban political ecology

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## 摘要

本文将第十届中国花卉博览会视为绿色国家创业主义实践的典型案例，对其进行了批判性的审视。此次花博会被宣传为推进崇明岛向“世界级生态岛”转型的旗舰级生态盛会，但它最终与其说是可持续发展转型的一个载体，不如说是一场绿色合法性的表演，其间充斥着短期积累和长期推迟。本文基于广泛的实地调研，并运用整合了绿色国家创业主义、战略性不作为和城市政治生态学的综合分析框架，阐述了生态话语如何通过大型活动被运用起来，以吸引投资、重组空间并巩固国家权力，同时延缓实质性的社会生态转型。我们认为，花博会后的停滞不只是反映了实施失败或“漂绿”，而是揭示了规避风险型环境治理方略的更深层逻辑。通过象征性的合规和选择性的贯彻，地方政府维持了绿色承诺的表象，同时却回避了结构性变革。本文通过突出战略性不作为作为一种治理模式的作用，为威权环境主义和城市可持续发展转型的批判性讨论做出了贡献。本文强调绿色创业主义非但没有克服生态危机，反而可能固化不平等的社会环境结果，并再生产其声称要解决的矛盾。

## 关键词

生态景观、事件主导型发展、绿色国家创业主义、战略性不作为、城市政治生态学

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## Introduction

In recent years, China's urban governance has increasingly embraced ecological goals as part of a broader strategy to rebrand cities, attract capital, and consolidate political legitimacy (Xie et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Central to this shift is the rise to green state entrepreneurialism—a governance mode in which environmental objectives are strategically fused with state-led development and market-oriented logics (Zhang and Wu, 2024). Under the policy rubric of “ecological civilization,” local governments deploy green infrastructure, industrial upgrades, and high-profile mega-events to signal environmental modernity and perform alignment with national priorities (den Hartog, 2025; Zhang et al., 2022, 2023; Zhang and Ming, 2022).

Among these strategies, the use of high-profile mega-events—a practice known as event-led development, is a prominent instrument in the repertoire of entrepreneurial governance (Lauer mann, 2016a; Shin,

2014). Globally, mega-events—from expos to garden festivals—have been mobilized to catalyze urban development, stimulate land valorization, and project international prestige (Karic and Losacker, 2023; Kassens-Noor et al., 2019; Li and Xiao, 2022). In China, such events serve not only as instruments of spatial restructuring but also as societal and ecological spectacles—mobilized to facilitate capital accumulation, reinforce socio-political stability (Shin, 2012), and perform alignment with green mandates (Wang et al., 2019), even as they obscure the deeper tensions between sustainability ambitions and developmental imperatives. This raises a question: when ecological urbanism is enacted through spectacle, what transformation—if any—occurs?

This article examines the 10th China Flower Expo, held in 2021 on Chongming Island, Shanghai, as a critical case of green state entrepreneurialism. Promoted as a national exemplar of ecological development, Chongming embraced the Expo as a key instrument in its ambition to become a

“world-class ecological island.” Themed around “ecology, innovation, humanities, and sharing,” the Expo delivered temporary landscapes, accelerated infrastructure upgrades, and media visibility, while simultaneously marginalizing local participation and reinforcing car-centric design. In the post-Expo phase, just 1 km west of the site, an elevated high-speed railway and new station are under construction, promising greater accessibility, tourism flows, and possible real estate speculation (den Hartog, 2021). Yet delays and the quiet abandonment of follow-up projects—exacerbated by the pandemic and the real estate slowdown—have produced post-event stasis, raising questions about the political rationalities underpinning such events.

To analyze these contradictions, this article draws insights from recent work on green state entrepreneurialism and urban political ecology while introducing our conceptual lens of *strategic inaction*. We argue that local authorities, facing institutional ambiguity and fiscal pressure, may deliberately defer, dilute, or suspend ecological implementation after high-profile spectacles. Rather than policy failure, such inaction constitutes a form of *risk-averse environmental statecraft*, designed to manage uncertainty while maintaining symbolic alignment with central ecological mandates.

Extending the framework of green state entrepreneurialism, we highlight how ecological civilization discourse intertwines with state-led investment strategies and flexible market instruments. Green mega-projects such as expos, parks, and eco-cities function as vehicles for territorial branding, short-term valorization, and state legitimation, while also revealing tensions between central mandates and the political, fiscal, and institutional realities of local governance. These tensions, in turn, incentivize spectacular displays of ecological achievement while deferring more costly or uncertain transformations.

Here, urban political ecology (UPE) offers a complementary lens to interrogate how such spectacles produce and distribute urban natures unevenly. Urban political ecology foregrounds the socio-ecological power relations through which state-led initiatives territorialize nature, displace dissent, and reproduce exclusions under the banner of sustainability (Gabriel, 2016; Wang et al., 2023). Recent scholarship extends UPE beyond neoliberal democracies to authoritarian and event-based governance, illuminating how environmental spectacles are metabolized into uneven socio-ecological landscapes.

Together, these perspectives enable us to see green urbanism not as linear transition but as governance animated by spectacle and deferral—a choreography of temporary visibility and selective retreat. Events like the Flower Expo function as technologies of legitimacy: low-risk, high-impact performances that align with national discourses while eschewing deeper structural transformation.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: the next section introduces the analytical framework, while the third section outlines the case and methodology. Then, the fourth section analyzes the Flower Expo’s development dynamics, spatial logics, and post-event consequences, while the Discussion section considers broader implications for state-led environmental governance in China. The final section concludes with reflections on the performative limits of green transformation in authoritarian urban contexts.

## Literature review

### *Green state entrepreneurialism: Ecological development as performative statecraft*

We use green state entrepreneurialism to denote a state-led fusion of ecological goals

and market instruments serving development and legitimation. Building on the broader notion of state entrepreneurialism (Mazzucato, 2015; Sun et al., 2024; Wu, 2018, 2020), it departs from neoliberal models by foregrounding state centrality in shaping markets, mobilizing ecological discourses, and orchestrating development. Unlike entrepreneurial governance in liberal democracies, where municipal authorities act within market constraints, China's state entrepreneurialism directs capital flows, brands ecological ambition, and frames sustainability as a source of political authority.

Under the banner of *ecological civilization* (Pan, 2016), subnational governments are tasked with demonstrating environmental leadership while sustaining growth (Xie et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). This dual mandate is pursued through high-profile projects such as eco-cities, ecological corridors, and garden expos—simultaneously tools of policy compliance, spatial restructuring, and developmental branding (Liu and Lo, 2023; Pow and Neo, 2013). In practice, local authorities mobilize fiscal instruments such as green bonds and quasi-governmental actors like state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to deliver ecological projects while opening new avenues for accumulation (Feng et al., 2024; Zhang and Wu, 2024).

These projects embody what scholars term the *ecological fix*: interventions that promise sustainability but primarily stabilize growth and legitimize governance amid socio-environmental tensions (Ekers and Prudham, 2017; Zhang and Wu, 2022). Flagship initiatives such as eco-parks, exhibition pavilions, and model zones create spectacular landscapes and symbolic performances that signal compliance with national mandates and attract investment (den Hartog, 2021; Shin and Zhao, 2018). Yet their transformative effects remain limited: research shows they often privilege formal compliance, visual branding, and short-term

visibility over substantive socio-ecological change (Caprotti et al., 2015; Ren, 2012; Xie et al., 2019). The result is uneven development, where spaces of showcase and speculation coexist with marginalized communities and neglected ecologies.

These contradictions are not aberrations but systemic features of green state entrepreneurialism. Environmental discourses are mobilized not as correctives to developmentalism, but as its recalibration—providing new frontiers for land valorization, legitimacy, and elite-oriented economies (Chien, 2013). In this sense, the “green” dimension serves less to transform governance than to sustain its existing logics through new aesthetic and symbolic repertoires (Pow, 2017).

It is within this ambivalent terrain that *strategic inaction* becomes especially salient. If green state entrepreneurialism is characterized by ambitious spectacles that project ecological commitment, its limits often emerge through selective withdrawal and quiet abandonment. The next section develops this argument by conceptualizing inaction not as failure, but as a calculated technique of environmental governance that stabilizes uncertainty while preserving legitimacy.

### ***Strategic inaction: Deferral as environmental governance***

We conceptualize *strategic inaction* as a mode of environmental governance in which calculated delays, deferrals, or symbolic commitments allow states to hedge against risk while maintaining legitimacy. Rather than reading governance gaps as failures, inertia, or weak enforcement, we argue that inaction itself can be deliberate and productive. In authoritarian and entrepreneurial contexts, this mode of governance is especially salient: ecological ambition is staged for visibility, but substantive transformation may be indefinitely postponed.

This argument builds on long-standing theories of policy inaction and non-decision-making. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) showed how power operates not only through explicit choices but also through the suppression of alternatives. McConnell and 't Hart (2019) distinguish between passive and calculated forms of inaction, while Bauer and Knill (2012) emphasize that policy dismantling can occur through neglect, symbolic redesign, or allowing initiatives to quietly lapse. In environmental politics, such dynamics are often cloaked in *symbolic performance*. Edelman (1985) and Dryzek (2022) remind us that states frequently invoke ecological responsibility to project legitimacy, even in the absence of substantive follow-through. Strategic inaction extends these insights to green state entrepreneurialism: ecological projects may be launched as spectacles, yet their promised reforms can be softened or quietly abandoned without being formally disavowed.

In authoritarian environmentalism, such calculated restraint is not incidental but systemic. Ambitious commitments are performed through highly visible flagship projects, but their promised reforms are often slowed, diluted, or quietly abandoned once the spotlight fades. This dynamic is reinforced by the logic of cadre evaluation: performance is measured through visible compliance with central mandates, but officials are also judged on avoiding fiscal crises or social unrest. In this context, strategic inaction becomes a rationalized governance strategy: do enough to be seen, but not enough to fail.

Mega-events illustrate this choreography particularly well. Scholars note that large-scale spectacles often promise ambitious transformation but rarely sustain it once the spotlight moves on (Lauermaun, 2016b; Müller, 2015). Post-event stasis is not only a byproduct of waning attention but a form of deliberate recalibration, allowing states to

reap symbolic legitimacy without bearing the long-term costs of structural reform (Gaffney, 2013). In China, where mega-events are frequently tied to land valorization, real estate speculation, or elite tourism (Li and Xiao, 2022; Lin et al., 2018), their aftermath often reveals the limits of ecological promises. Strategic inaction captures how these limits are actively managed—through silence, delay, and selective retreat.

Importantly, this perspective complicates prevailing narratives of entrepreneurial governance as inherently proactive, innovative, or risk-taking. Our focus on inaction highlights its inverse: how ecological modernization is reconfigured into a *temporal choreography of ambition without delivery*. The ecological fix is not only spatial—mobilizing land, capital, and spectacle—but also temporal, projecting solutions into a deferred horizon. In this way, green state entrepreneurialism is sustained not despite inaction, but through it.

### *Urban political ecology: Uneven power and ecological outcomes*

Urban political ecology provides a critical lens for examining how urban natures are produced and contested through political-economic relations. While green state entrepreneurialism highlights how ecological goals are mobilized for accumulation and legitimacy, and strategic inaction explains how these ambitions are deferred, UPE reveals the distributional consequences: who benefits, who is marginalized, and how ecological burdens are unevenly borne.

Urban political ecology rejects technocratic views of green urbanism by emphasizing that ecological projects are always embedded in power relations. Urban environments are shaped through accumulation, enclosure and displacement, often under the banner of sustainability (Heynen et al.,

2006; Robbins, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2004). In China, state-led flagship projects often privilege elite and speculative interests while marginalizing grassroots participation and distributive equity (Ren, 2012; Xie et al., 2019).

This perspective sharpens the analysis of green spectacle. Projects celebrated as ecological achievements often obscure displacement, labor precarity, or degraded ecologies. Concepts such as “green grabbing” (Fairhead et al., 2012) capture how land and resources are appropriated in the name of sustainability. Applied to mega-events, UPE highlights how spectacular interventions may privilege investors and visitors, while sidelining peripheral communities and everyday needs.

Urban political ecology also clarifies the socio-ecological implications of deferral. Delays in pollution control, land remediation, or promised infrastructure rarely affect all actors equally. Instead, they externalize risks onto “sacrifice zones” (Juskus, 2023) where vulnerable groups and ecologies absorb the costs of inaction. In contrast, state agencies and SOEs retain flexibility to redirect or withdraw resources. Strategic inaction, viewed through UPE, thus produces patterned exclusions that reproduce uneven urban power geometries.

Recent work extends UPE to authoritarian and event-based governance. Connolly (2019) and Tzaninis et al. (2021) argue for planetary and situated approaches that trace how infrastructures, special zones, and spectacles shape socio-environmental relations across scales (also see Lawhon et al., 2014). In China, hybrid modes of authority—sovereign, disciplinary, neoliberal, and knowledge-based—have been shown to co-produce environmental governance (Wang et al., 2023). These insights resonate with the Flower Expo, where ecological spectacle,

state mandates, and speculative development converged in peripheral spaces.

In sum, UPE provides the critical perspective that complements green state entrepreneurialism and strategic inaction. It illuminates how the temporal choreography of spectacle and deferral is not experienced evenly, but rather produces exclusions and uneven benefits. By centering questions of justice and power, UPE underscores why it matters who gains and who loses when environmental governance proceeds through performance and postponement.

### *Synthesis: Integrating governance, temporality, and unevenness*

Our framework brings the three perspectives into dialogue to explain how green governance operates through spectacle, deferral, and uneven outcomes. *Green state entrepreneurialism* identifies the structural conditions through which ecological mandates are fused with developmental logics and translated into visible projects. *Strategic inaction* captures the temporal management of these ambitions—commitments staged for visibility but later slowed, suspended, or quietly abandoned to hedge against political and fiscal risk. *Urban political ecology* exposes the socio-ecological consequences of this choreography, highlighting how power asymmetries shape who gains and who bears the costs of both action and retreat.

By combining these lenses, we approach green urbanism not as a linear transition but as a governance formation animated by spectacle and deferral. The Flower Expo case illustrates how front-loaded performance, discursive compliance, and selective follow-through coexist with post-event inertia that preserves elite flexibility and externalizes risk. These patterns, far from representing simple policy failure, reveal the systemic interplay between entrepreneurial

spectacle, calculated delay, and uneven socio-ecological transformation.

## Methodology and contextual background of the Flower Expo

Covering 589 hectares, the 10th China Flower Expo, held on Chongming Island in 2021, is China's largest national horticultural event site to date. While smaller than global spectacles like the Olympics or World Expositions, the Flower Expo is internationally recognized as a horticultural mega-event. Such events serve dual purposes: branding regional identity and catalyzing spatial transformation (Karic and Losacker, 2023). Comparable examples include the Netherlands' Floriade—an international exposition held every 10 years since 1960—which has been consistently deployed to support urban renewal initiatives (van Dooren, 2023).

The China Flower Expo, established in 1987, has evolved from a biennial exhibition into a quadrennial rotating mega-event through which host cities signal ecological ambition and developmental branding. The 2021 Chongming edition was framed as a convergence of nature, culture, and innovation, intended to pilot green infrastructure and promote floriculture-driven development. This study adopts a critical case study approach, positioning the Flower Expo as a vivid site through which green state entrepreneurialism is both enacted and unsettled. Rather than evaluating the event as a binary success or failure, we examine how it functioned as a governance instrument that fused ecological spectacle with developmental ambiguity. Particular attention is paid to the post-expo period, where suspended projects and dissipated momentum illustrate how strategic inaction operates as a form of risk-averse environmental statecraft. Our inquiry is guided by three questions: *How does the Flower Expo exemplify the logic of green*

*state entrepreneurialism under authoritarian conditions? How are ecological ideals selectively mobilized and spatialized? And how does the event's aftermath reflect broader patterns of symbolic compliance and strategic inaction?*

Empirically, this research draws on a multi-temporal and multi-scalar fieldwork strategy. We systematically reviewed official planning documents, statistical yearbooks, investment reports, and media coverage to trace the Expo's discursive framing, governance structures, and implementation dynamics. Intensive fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2023, supplemented by longitudinal insights from 2016 to 2025 through repeated site visits and related research on Chongming Island (one of the authors resides nearby and both have conducted prior studies on the island). This embedded engagement provides a firmly grounded perspective across the phases of pre-event planning, event execution, and post-event transition. During site visits we documented changes in land use, mobility infrastructure, spatial branding, and the continuity—or suspension—of projects.

For this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with over 45 individuals, including local government officials, urban planners, landscape contractors, event organizers, business owners, residents, and taxi drivers. Informal conversations and ethnographic observations further contextualized everyday socio-ecological transformations associated with the Expo. We also interviewed academics, Dutch horticultural consultants, and green industry professionals involved in cross-border or policy-adjacent initiatives related to Chongming's development. Although not all interlocutors were based on the island, their perspectives illuminated the scalar and institutional dimensions of the Expo's design and its post-event recalibration. Direct access to township governments and village cadres proved difficult, reflecting the

sensitivities of engaging lower-tier officials in an authoritarian context.

We managed to speak with local officials and community representatives in several townships such as Qilong, Haiyong, Hengsha, and Dongtan, but their input was largely limited to official narratives and promotional media praising Chongming's transformation. Behind these polished accounts, however, interviews and informal exchanges revealed a more complex picture: many flower growers had been forced to cease operations due to mismanagement and limited technical capacity. The abrupt dismantling of temporary farms and lack of institutional support underscored the fragility of the Expo's horticultural ambitions. These dynamics highlight a broader pattern: Expo governance was overwhelmingly narrated and implemented by district-level planners and SOEs, with minimal participation from local residents or experienced entrepreneurs—reinforcing the vertical concentration of authority within the local state.

By adopting a multi-scalar, multi-temporal approach, the research interrogates not only what the Expo achieved but also what it allowed the state to defer. In doing so, it traces how the event operated as a node of governance, spectacle, and uncertainty—performing alignment with national ecological mandates while avoiding deeper structural commitments. The next section analyzes these dynamics in depth, exploring how the Flower Expo simultaneously enacted green entrepreneurialism and exposed its governing contradictions.

## **Performing and deferring green development: The Chongming Flower Expo in practice**

### *Staging green modernity: The planning and promises of the Expo*

The planning of the 10th China Flower Expo officially began in 2017, when

Chongming District—with strong backing from the Shanghai Municipal Government—formed a leading group to secure hosting rights. This culminated in the 2018 confirmation that Chongming would host the national event. The Expo was framed not merely as a horticultural showcase, but as a strategic lever to advance Chongming's ambition to become a “world-class ecological island.”

From the outset, the Expo was conceived as both a policy tool and a spatial reordering device. The local government enlisted Guangming Food Group—a major state-owned enterprise (SOE) under the Shanghai State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission—as the lead implementer. This reflected a typical green state entrepreneurialism arrangement, where SOEs serve as quasi-governmental actors blending state mandates with market logics. A dedicated Flower Expo Coordination headquarters was established, and in 2019, Guangming created a spin-off company—the Guangming Ecological Island Investment Development Co., Ltd.—to oversee Expo-related projects including real estate, tourism, and low-carbon development across a 119.7 km<sup>2</sup> zone.

Among its flagship initiatives was the Guangming Flower Expo Hotel, constructed as the centerpiece of the broader Dongping Eco-Town initiative. Here, ecological spectacle, commercial development, and policy alignment converged. The Expo catalyzed extensive infrastructural investment: a new park complex, expanded roads and parking facilities, and high-profile landscaping works. Interviewees on site described the new facilities as “grand and beautiful, but empty or even abandoned,” with limited relevance to their local daily life and the improved accessibility mainly geared toward outsiders (*Waidiren*). While planning documents were infused with green rhetoric, design choices—such as hardscaping, car-

centric infrastructure, and underutilized exhibition pavilions—prioritized short-term visibility and investor signaling over long-term ecological transformation.

In this context, the Flower Expo served not only as a stage for ecological performance—which is remarkable given that flower growing is resource-intensive, requiring high water and energy input and extensive use of pesticides and fertilizers, especially when soil conditions are suboptimal (based on conversations with horticulture experts in Shanghai, Jiangsu Province, and the Netherlands)—but also as a territorial strategy for both policy demonstration and capital accumulation, mirroring the dynamics observed in other Chinese mega-events (Shin, 2012). State-owned enterprises like Guangming operated as intermediaries translating national ecological mandates into spatialized development projects—producing green imagery, unlocking land value, and cultivating state legitimacy under the banner of sustainability. Yet this highly staged performance also revealed the contradictions of green state entrepreneurialism: an emphasis on spectacle and growth, selectively decoupled from deeper structural commitments.

These contradictions extended to the management of attendance. While official projections estimated around 3 million visitors over the full run (Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, 2021), actual turnout was significantly lower—only 20,000 attended on opening day (Xinhua News Agency, 2021), and our COVID-era site visits similarly observed sparse crowds. For comparison, the Beijing Horticultural Exhibition drew 9.3 million visitors in 2019, about three times the expected number for Shanghai's edition on Chongming. Entry required digital health declarations and travel records, with multiple checkpoints and limited transport. Parking lots were nearly empty, and one co-

author and their partner were initially denied entry due to travel code discrepancies. Locals confirmed skepticism over reported numbers, noting that all the residents on the whole island received free tickets and a day off—recalling similar tactics during the 2010 Shanghai Expo. Group visits by schoolchildren and elderly residents reinforced the appearance of popularity. Despite ticket charges (80–100 CNY for adults) and travel costs (including toll for the bridge), the island prepared 45,000 hotel beds, mostly in homestays—many of which remained underutilized. A new high-speed ferry was introduced, but without sufficient public transportation from dock to site. These dynamics suggest a curated spectacle: official figures conveyed success, but on-the-ground experiences revealed limited organic public engagement. These contradictions would resurface with greater clarity in the Expo's post-event aftermath.

### *Spatial contradictions and the politics of infrastructural prioritization*

While the Flower Expo foregrounded ecological values in its planning rhetoric, its spatial interventions revealed a more ambivalent logic. Central to this contradiction was the transformation of land use and mobility infrastructure—elements that undercut the stated ecological ambitions and illuminated the selective priorities of green state entrepreneurialism.

To accommodate the construction of the 589-hectare Expo Park and adjacent developments, significant areas of farmland were reclassified. According to planning documents, approximately 7873 m<sup>2</sup> of high-quality farmland were converted for Expo-related infrastructure. Although the local government designated an equivalent area in Chenjia Town as compensation farmland, questions remain about the comparative soil quality and long-term agricultural viability

of these reallocated zones. This exchange reflects a recurring practice in Chinese green planning: spatial compensation as a bureaucratic fix that prioritizes formal compliance over substantive ecological continuity.

The tension between ecological rhetoric and car-centric infrastructure was particularly evident in mobility investments. The expansion of Jianshe Road into a five-lane expressway, spanning over 8 km, was emblematic of this contradiction. While official narratives emphasized “eco-friendly” transport, the infrastructure disproportionately favored private automobile use, undermining goals of sustainable mobility. Parking lots were constructed both within and around the Expo Park, with little provision for public transit or non-motorized alternatives. Interviews with residents and visitors noted the irony of promoting ecological civilization through large-scale construction that removed trees and encouraged car dependency: “They call it green, but you need to drive everywhere,” remarked a local business owner.

Despite some sustainable design certifications—such as the SITES Gold and WELL Gold Interim Certificates—the ecological benefits of these projects remain ambiguous. Certifications rewarded design principles, but did not necessarily translate into long-term environmental performance or shifts in mobility behavior. The emphasis remained on highly visible green aesthetics and buildout, rather than on systemic ecological transformation or behavioral integration.

In parallel, the Flower Expo spurred real estate speculation and high-profile tourism-oriented development. Projects like the Blossom Mansion, a luxury housing development near Dongping Forest Park, capitalized on the visibility and prestige of the Expo. Although framed as part of Chongming’s eco-tourism future, such developments were largely inaccessible to local

residents, reinforcing dynamics of ecological gentrification commonly associated with urban green development (Grauslund Kristensen, 2025). These dynamics illustrate how green state entrepreneurialism leverages green spectacle to revalorize land and attract capital, even as underlying socio-environmental challenges remain deferred.

In sum, the spatial strategy of the Flower Expo prioritized visibility over embeddedness, and development over ecological resilience. Land conversion, car-centric planning, and real estate speculation all exemplify how green state entrepreneurialism mobilizes ecological discourse for growth, while sidelining long-term sustainability. These choices, while enabling temporary alignment with national green agendas, also created conditions for the strategic deferral of deeper reforms—a pattern that would become more visible in the Expo’s aftermath.

### *Industrial dreams and sectoral disjuncture: The flower industry that never bloomed*

A central narrative attached to the Chongming Flower Expo was the ambition to catalyze a local flower industry. Embedded within broader green development discourses, this promises positioned flower cultivation and associated value chains—trading, research, education—as the cornerstone of an emerging green economy. Official documents cited the Expo as a launchpad for sectoral transformation, with goals including the establishment of a Global Flower Trading Center, research facilities, and floriculture-themed tourism (Chongming District People’s Government, 2021). These objectives reflected the strategic optimism of green state entrepreneurialism: aligning ecological branding with economic upgrading.

Flowers, however, were not new to Chongming. Floral elements had long featured in island-wide beautification campaigns

and roadside plantings (Xie et al., 2019). Some sources even claim that Chongming has a history of flower cultivation spanning over 500 years (Jiang, 2018), though such assertions are debatable given the island's relatively recent settlement history. Prior to the Expo, horticulture-related enterprises had already emerged in villages on the island such as Qilong—known for its houseplants—and Haiyong, which specialized in Chinese roses (*Rosa chinensis*). However, both villages fell under Jiangsu Province's jurisdiction rather than that of Shanghai's Chongming District. As a result, while these enterprises predated the Expo and benefited marginally from the broader branding push, their development remained limited due to their exclusion from core planning areas and a lack of integrated industrial support.

Interestingly, both the Qilong and Haiyong brands identified themselves as “Dutch” to capitalize on international green reputations, even installing windmills for branding purposes. Yet their founders were Chinese nationals with experience in Germany, and the firms maintained no substantive connection to the Netherlands. Another floriculture venture, launched on Hengsha Island (within Chongming District) in response to the Expo's momentum, went bankrupt within two years due to a combination of soil conditions, pandemic disruptions, and management challenges.

Despite the branding surge, the realities of post-Expo industrial development reveal a different picture. Statistical data from the Chongming Yearbooks (2015–2022) show no meaningful growth in flower-specific agriculture. Flowers were only intermittently grouped under broader “cash crops” and did not emerge as a distinct sector even after the Expo. Local interviews confirmed that flower farming remained marginal and largely experimental. One farmer noted: “Large-scale flower cultivation? That's not

something Chongming people have ever done.”

The institutional emphasis on floriculture was relatively recent. While the “13th Five-Year Plan” and the “Eco Plus” development strategy had included it as a target industry (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2016), the lack of historical expertise, infrastructure, and market linkages hindered its viability. Despite partnerships with Dutch firms and the promotion of tulip greenhouses and themed gardens, most projects remained underutilized or abandoned following the Expo. Interviewees pointed to greenhouses left vacant and flower-related signage covering empty lots as evidence of symbolic investment without operational follow-through.

This industrial inertia cannot be reduced to poor planning alone. Rather, it reflects the strategic selectivity of green entrepreneurialism under constrained conditions. Resources were concentrated on spectacle rather than durable sector-building. High-visibility interventions like park landscapes, branding campaigns, and media-friendly exhibitions received ample support, while slower, riskier investments in floricultural production, distribution, and local training were deprioritized. As one local entrepreneur described the situation: “They built beautiful gardens for the Expo, but after that, the industry just disappeared.”

COVID-19 further accelerated this deferral. Flower-related projects were suspended during lockdowns and never resumed. The Expo Park, once a flagship green site, was partially converted into a quarantine facility and remains underutilized. Plans to create a permanent “Flower Town” were quietly shelved. Strategic inaction here functioned as a form of risk management—enabling officials to demonstrate green ambition without committing to contested or slow-yield structural reforms. We also acknowledge

that land regulations—particularly prime farmland protections and restrictions on non-agricultural conversion—may have further constrained follow-up industrial investment, though this was not a central focus of our fieldwork.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the gap between symbolic projection and structural support. While the Expo temporarily branded Chongming as a “flower island,” its horticultural transformation remains shallow. The promised floriculture industry has yet to materialize, revealing a persistent disjuncture between ecological spectacle and socio-economic development. This stunted trajectory reflects a core feature of green state entrepreneurialism: an asymmetry between visible performance and embedded change. Framed as transformative, sectoral development was implemented selectively and briefly—yielding symbolic alignment with national goals but little lasting integration into the local economy.

### *Post-Expo inertia: Strategic inaction and the vanishing horizon of green transformation*

If the planning and staging of the Flower Expo embodied the visible front of green state entrepreneurialism, the post-event period exposed its limits. Despite the event’s positioning as a springboard for sustained ecological and economic renewal, the years following the Expo were marked by delay, suspension, and retreat. Promised follow-up projects—including industry incubators, tourism corridors, and the transformation of the Expo Park into a multifunctional green town—stalled or quietly disappeared. For many local residents, the abrupt fading of momentum evoked disappointment. As one business owner observed: “They said there would be a Flower Town, but nothing really happened after the Expo closed.”

Rather than reading this stagnation as a simple governance failure, it can be better understood as an instance of strategic inaction: a calculated non-decision to withhold further implementation in the face of risk and uncertainty. Interviews revealed a cautious posture among local planners and officials. Several noted that post-Expo plans had become “sensitive” or “unrealistic” given fiscal pressures, COVID-19 disruptions, and shifting leadership priorities. By avoiding explicit cancellation, the local state preserved discursive alignment with ecological civilization mandates while minimizing political and financial exposure.

This calibrated withdrawal illustrates a broader mode of environmental governance under authoritarian entrepreneurialism: one that pairs spectacular visibility with deferred transformation. During the Expo’s peak, urban landscapes were curated, investment was mobilized, and compliance with national ecological agendas was visibly performed. But once the spotlight dimmed, the governing logic shifted. Uncertainties surrounding revenue generation, land allocation, and market readiness provided convenient justifications for inaction. As one interviewee from the district-level planning bureau noted: “After the Expo, it was hard to justify further spending. But we also couldn’t say we failed. So, things just paused.” Notably, township governments and village cadres appeared largely absent from Expo governance, both in our fieldwork encounters and in formal planning processes. Their limited visibility suggests not fragmentation but hierarchy: authority was concentrated in district-level bureaus and SOEs, marginalizing lower-level actors in ways consistent with Chongming’s broader governance structure.

This suspension had tangible consequences. The Expo Park, once envisioned as a public space for green education and leisure, remained largely closed to the public

and poorly maintained. Significant portions of the site were fenced off or reallocated to temporary uses, including a COVID-19 quarantine container park. Real estate projects stalled, hotels sat under-occupied, and auxiliary industries—such as flower trading or eco-tourism—failed to materialize. For residents and small businesses who had invested in anticipation of long-term benefits, the sense of abandonment was palpable. One homestay operator commented: “We renovated for the Expo, but guests stopped coming. We’re just left with debts.”

This governance pattern—of act-then-withdraw—underscores the risk-averse nature of green development under authoritarian conditions. In a system where performance metrics are key to cadre evaluation and political survival, the logic of “do enough to be seen, but not enough to fail” shapes both planning and its afterlife. The post-Expo inertia thus reflects not an absence of governance, but its modulation: a temporal strategy to hedge against accountability, avoid unpopular reforms, and maintain surface compliance with ecological ambitions.

Moreover, the deferral of action disproportionately affected the most vulnerable stakeholders. While SOEs and high-level officials could exit or reallocate resources, local entrepreneurs, informal workers, and residents bore the brunt of unmet expectations. Strategic inaction in this context operated as a form of socio-environmental selectivity—preserving elite flexibility while externalizing costs to the periphery.

Through the case of Chongming, the Flower Expo’s aftermath reveals how the ecological state can simultaneously perform ambition and preserve inertia. Green entrepreneurialism, in this model, functions less as a linear pathway to sustainability than as a choreography of action and inaction—of promises made visible and outcomes indefinitely postponed.

## Discussion: Governing through spectacle and inaction

The Chongming Flower Expo offers a revealing case through which to rethink how green development is performed, rationalized, and ultimately constrained in contemporary China. While existing scholarship on green state entrepreneurialism has emphasized its hybrid configuration—blending ecological rhetoric with market pragmatism and state control—this case shows how these components are not merely coexisting but strategically sequenced. Spectacle is front-loaded; transformation is deferred.

This temporal choreography underscores the logic of *strategic inaction* not as a breakdown, but as a systemic feature of green state entrepreneurialism. The Chongming government mobilized substantial resources to stage a high-profile ecological mega-event, aligning with central ecological civilization mandates and producing a green aesthetic of modernity. Yet once the spotlight dimmed, follow-up plans were delayed or quietly shelved. These decisions reflected a cautious strategy: by postponing costly or contentious reforms, officials preserved political flexibility and reduced fiscal exposure. In this sense, post-expo inertia was not a governance failure per se, but a form of calculated ambiguity—designed to hedge against fiscal risk, shifting policy winds, and political sensitivity. Inaction here functioned as a governance strategy: visible performance was followed by temporal retreat (cf. Lauermaun, 2016b; McConnell and ‘t Hart, 2019).

Our findings also intersect with recent accounts of a shift from entrepreneurial to managerial statecraft in post-pandemic China (Wu et al., 2025). Post-event deferral operates here as a managerial technique—recentralizing control over timelines, debt risks, and spatial priorities—while maintaining the entrepreneurial veneer of performance. Put differently, strategic inaction can be read as the

managerialization of green entrepreneurialism under tightening fiscal and political constraints.

This pattern expands theorization of green state entrepreneurialism by emphasizing its *performative temporality*: the green fix is not only spatial (via branding, infrastructure, and land-use shifts), but also temporal—projecting ecological ambition in the present while postponing structural change into an indeterminate future. Guangming Group’s dominance in Expo implementation, for instance, channeled investment toward highly visible assets while leaving slower-yielding or redistributive projects in suspension. Such selectivity illustrates how entrepreneurial spectacle and strategic inaction are intertwined: capital and legitimacy are mobilized quickly, but deeper reforms are deferred. Green entrepreneurialism thus becomes a double-edged mechanism: enabling rapid mobilization of resources while cultivating delay and developmental ambiguity.

The Chongming case also demonstrates how green symbolism can obscure exclusionary politics. Local communities—residents, farmers, small business owners—were largely treated as spectators rather than participants. Ecological modernity was spatially realized through car-centric infrastructure and speculative real estate, while socio-economic benefits were marginal or transient (Shin, 2012). These design priorities reveal how spectacle was privileged over systemic ecological change, further evidencing strategic inaction as a temporal deferral of more challenging reforms. As one interviewee remarked, “It looked impressive, but it was for the Expo, not for us.” These dynamics also reflect broader critiques of ecological gentrification (Jo Black and Richards, 2020) and “green grabbing” (Fairhead et al., 2012), where sustainability narratives justify spatial enclosure and elite reterritorialization.

Urban political ecology sharpens this critique by interrogating not just what is done, but what is left undone—and for whom (Xie et al., 2019). While SOEs and high-level actors retained flexibility to withdraw, residents and small investors were left with unfulfilled promises and unrecoverable costs. This asymmetry illustrates how strategic inaction operates through uneven power geometries, externalizing risks downward while elites preserve optionality. Urban political ecology thus foregrounds the politics of environmental silence and deferral: how power operates not only through action, but also through calculated non-action. The concentration of authority in SOEs and district bureaus, alongside the aforementioned limited and colored feedback by township governments and village cadres, further shows that uneven power geometries were structured not through horizontal fragmentation but through hierarchical exclusion within the local state.

Furthermore, Chongming’s case exemplifies what Goldfischer et al. (2020) term “obstinate curiosity” —a refusal to accept spectacular green performances at face value. By unpacking the Expo’s aesthetics, narratives, and absences, we expose the governance rationalities that animate ecological spectacle while avoiding structural reform. In parallel, the concept of “situated solidarity” reminds us to foreground local knowledges and struggles—from farmers bypassed by flower industry planning to shopkeepers left behind by tourism booms that never arrived (Goldfischer et al., 2020). These perspectives deepen the interpretive bridge between the local evidence and broader theoretical debates.

Together, green state entrepreneurialism, strategic inaction, and UPE form a layered framework for understanding the contradictions of China’s environmental governance: a calibrated regime of symbolic compliance

and selective retreat, where green development is enacted through both visibility and delay. Rather than interpreting Chongming as an exception, it exemplifies a broader modality of authoritarian environmentalism—capable of staging legitimacy while foreclosing inclusive transformation. This analysis not only extends the conceptual vocabulary of sustainability transitions but also clarifies how the ecological state governs through both promise and postponement.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking the politics of green transformation**

This article has examined the Chongming Flower Expo as a revealing instance of how green state entrepreneurialism operates not only through visible ecological spectacle but also through calculated strategic inaction. While the Expo outwardly signaled Chongming's alignment with national ecological civilization goals, its post-event stagnation exposes a deeper governance logic—one in which temporally bounded performances substitute for long-term ecological transformation.

Rather than interpreting this outcome as failure or mismanagement, we have argued that strategic inaction constitutes a core modality of environmental governance under authoritarian conditions. It enables local states to reap the short-term legitimacy of high-profile ecological interventions while deferring more contentious, uncertain, or less profitable reforms. Urban political ecology helps to illuminate how this governance strategy disproportionately externalizes risk and cost onto less powerful actors—residents, small businesses, and marginal producers—while maintaining elite flexibility and symbolic coherence with central mandates.

Theoretically, this article contributes an integrated perspective linking green state entrepreneurialism, strategic inaction, and

UPE. This approach foregrounds not just the contradictions of green governance, but the mechanisms through which these contradictions are managed, depoliticized, or deferred. It repositions inaction not as an anomaly or failure, but as a rationalized technique of governance—especially salient in post-spectacle, fiscally constrained, and politically cautious contexts. In doing so, it advances UPE debates by extending their analytical focus from active interventions and accumulation strategies to the politics of inaction, showing how socio-ecological power is also exercised through omission, delay, and deferral within state-led environmental projects.

Empirically, the case of Chongming shows how event-led ecological development can generate spatial restructuring and green symbolism without sustained institutional or industrial transformation. The Flower Expo's legacy lies not only in what was built, but also in what was postponed, sidelined, or quietly abandoned. This dynamic underscores the need for greater critical attention to the temporal political dimensions of green governance—in particular, what happens after the spectacle ends.

Yet even within constrained governance architectures, alternative pathways remain viable. These include integrating green mega-events into long-term spatial planning frameworks rather than staging them as isolated spectacles; establishing durable institutional channels for meaningful community participation; and recalibrating the role of state-owned enterprises to enable—rather than eclipse—grassroots ecological economies. Realizing such shifts demands more than technical or policy tweaks; it requires a fundamental political reorientation in how ecological futures are envisioned, governed, and collectively enacted.


Looking ahead, sustainability transitions scholarship must engage more seriously with the limits and contradictions of state-led

ecological projects. In particular, it must contend with how green ambitions can be mobilized to legitimize uneven development, depoliticize dissent, and preserve elite advantage. By foregrounding inaction as a strategic choice—and situating it alongside possibilities for reform—this article calls for a more grounded and critical account of how environmental governance is enacted: through both presence and absence, promise and deferral. In short, what is shown (spectacle) and what is sustained (deferral) are systematically linked. Planning for greener cities must therefore interrogate the governance of afterlives—budgeting, institutions, and accountability—rather than celebrating the moment of spectacle.

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