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Green Space Production as a State Project in Urban China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the production of urban spaces shaped by political intentions that transcend capitalist imperatives. We examine the politics of developing Chengdu's greenway project by operationalising state entrepreneurialism—a perspective of territorial logic and capitalist logic in urban governance—through strategic embeddedness and tactical mobilisation. Strategic embeddedness refers to the institutional integration of the market into the state apparatus to achieve the state's strategic goals, while tactical mobilisation refers to the constrained manoeuvres employed by state agencies to mobilise external interests. In Chengdu, state actions *strategically* embedded market finance into the ecological project of political significance through large-scale state–capital coordination and *tactically* mobilised a pro-growth coalition for financialised housing development. The state politics differ markedly from the new urban politics that mainly serve global mobile capital. In this context, capitalist logic becomes secondary to the contextualised territorial logic underpinning China's ecological agendas. This study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial cities and state-led ecological spaces by foregrounding the intentional dimension of statecraft and advancing state entrepreneurialism as a conceptual and analytical framework.

1 | Introduction

Over the past three decades, green space production has evolved in tandem with neoliberalisation as a capitalist project, where the 'dull compulsion' of market forces drives profit-seeking, capital-intensive and speculative ventures (Peck 2014). Environmental initiatives become a strategic battleground between the endless accumulation impulses and alternative agendas for socio-ecological justice (Harvey 1996; Thompson 2023). The competing logics are central to understanding urban governance because, once the veil of profit-driven compulsion is lifted, it becomes clear that all urban projects, even those deeply rooted in the logic of profit generation and financial speculation, are shaped by an interplay of political-ideological and economic visions (Harvey 2003; Lauermaun 2018; Wu et al. 2024).

This study brings attention to the relationship between accumulation strategies and hegemonic visions in green space production. While accumulation strategies prioritise economic expansion, hegemonic visions encompass broader non-economic goals, such as military success, social reform, political stability and moral regeneration (Jessop 2010). Urban greening involves not only the (re)making of physical space but also the (re)production of domination (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). However, most studies examining how greening politics shape political visions remain enclosed within a hegemonic imaginary such that enhanced state capacity tends to stabilise accumulation strategies and advance the visions of capitalist elites.

This paper understands the production of urban green spaces to be shaped by context-specific political intentions and concrete

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actions. The position draws on critical historical conjunctures of capitalism while starting from the vantage point of a yet-to-be-capitalist context in China (Wu et al. 2024). Specifically, the study conceptualises Chengdu's citywide greenway development as a state project, underscoring the territorial logic of state intentionality and the state politics of materialisation. Chengdu is a city in Southwest China. The municipal government governs a metropolitan area of 14,335 km², whose population reached 21 million in 2023. In 2017, the Party Secretary and *de facto* municipal leader launched the 'Tianfu Greenway' plan and proposed a metropolitan greenway system stretching 16,930 km. The greenway development was associated with the idea of ecological corridors (Chung et al. 2018) and regional ecological improvement (Liu et al. 2024), introducing strict ecological regulations. By the end of 2023, 7000 km had been completed, including a 100-km circular greenway around the central urban area, connecting a 133-square-kilometre belt area known as the Chengdu Eco-zone.

Chengdu's greenway development has advanced a political vision rooted in territorial logic. First, we contextualise the concept of 'territorial logic' within urban green visions. We adopt the term 'territorial logic' in dialectical tension with capitalist logic (Arrighi 2007; Wu et al. 2024). Harvey (2006, 107) defines territorial logic as 'the political, diplomatic and military strategies invoked and used by a territorially defined entity such as a state,' and capitalist logic as 'the ways in which economic power flows across and through continuous space.' The emphasis on capitalist logic has been critiqued for overshadowing the empirical significance of territorial logic (Jessop 2006). Chinese urban development underscores the state's planning authority (Wu 2018), an argument further reinforced by 'ecological civilisation' (Chung and Xu 2021; Rodenbiker 2021). The territorial logic in green space production extends beyond spatial territorialisation to encompass state–capital reconfiguration.

Second, we analyse the implementation of the greenway project by operationalising the concept of 'state entrepreneurialism' through two interrelated processes: strategic embeddedness and tactical mobilisation. This is based on the understanding that state power is not simply imposed but continuously (re)produced through the interactions of multiple agencies (Loftus 2020). Even when state strategies are powerful, its agencies must constantly engage with other actors to sustain that power (Deng 2023; Huang et al. 2021). We leverage De Certeau's (1984) 'tactic'—typically understood as the art of the unprivileged or marginalised—to explore the exercise of power and the everyday origin of domination. This offers a response to criticisms that everyday politics risks romanticising marginality (McFarlane 2011). We recontextualise the Polanyian term 'embeddedness' to describe a phenomenon where market mechanisms are harnessed specifically to serve the needs of the state. As such, we conceptualise strategic embeddedness as embedding market power in the state apparatus for achieving strategic intentions and tactical mobilisation as the constrained manoeuvres employed by state agencies to coordinate diverse interests and mobilise market and social actors. In Chengdu's greenway development, strategic embeddedness is reflected in the central role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and financialised housing development serves as a tactical approach to mobilising external interests.

We continue to critique the literature on capital-driven green politics in Section 2. Then, we conceptualise green space production as a state project in China in Section 3. Section 4 introduces the Chengdu case study. Section 5 explores state intentionality in Chengdu's greenway development. Section 6 analyses the state politics of delivering greenways through strategic embeddedness and tactical mobilisation. We conclude by arguing that Chengdu's state politics articulate a political vision rooted in territorial logic.

2 | Capital-Driven Green Politics

In advanced capitalist economies, integrating green infrastructure—including large-scale parks, waterfronts, canals and greenways—into their overall development strategy to attract global mobile capital has been a typical approach of late entrepreneurial cities (Garcia-Lamarca et al. 2021; Levenda and Tretter 2020). The 'new urban politics' of green space production emphasises growth. Facing neoliberal intercity competition, bolstering the green image of a city becomes a popular narrative of guaranteeing economic success (Long 2016). The growth machine is formed by 'place entrepreneurs' with 'government and other economic interests to promote a regrowth climate and an ideology of growth as a public good that benefits all' (Lang and Rothenberg 2017, 1747).

'Urban sustainability fix' reveals that the selective incorporation of ecological objectives into urban development programmes is to fix the crisis of overaccumulation (While et al. 2004; Walker 2016). Green elements are central to urban space production with promising potential for exchange value in either new development or regeneration (Garcia-Lamarca et al. 2021). However, flagship 'sustainability' projects often lead to speculation (Lang and Rothenberg 2017). Ecological amenities and mixed-use development increase property value. Many projects are essentially real estate development disguised by green discourses. Green narratives absorb opposing views and co-opt resistance from environmental or homeowner groups (Long 2016; Rosol et al. 2017).

The state plays regulatory and promotional roles in the capital-driven green space production. State actions range from enabling, by creating favourable regulatory contexts for the private sector (Lang and Rothenberg 2017), to propelling, by cultivating pro-growth coalitions among local political and economic elites (Levenda and Tretter 2020). Specific toolkits include deploying bond packages for environmental projects, forming public–private partnerships and channelling construction activities into the targeted area through environmental regulations (Smith et al. 2023; Long 2016; While et al. 2004).

Meanwhile, the delivery of these green projects relies heavily on the private sector, contributing to an increasingly decentralised form of neoliberal governance (Levenda and Tretter 2020). Fiscal austerity following the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) accelerated the transfer of governmental responsibilities for providing and maintaining ecological amenities to market actors, quasi-government branches and civic organisations. Local governments introduced financial tools, including green bonds, tax increments and impact funds (Smith et al. 2023) to finance

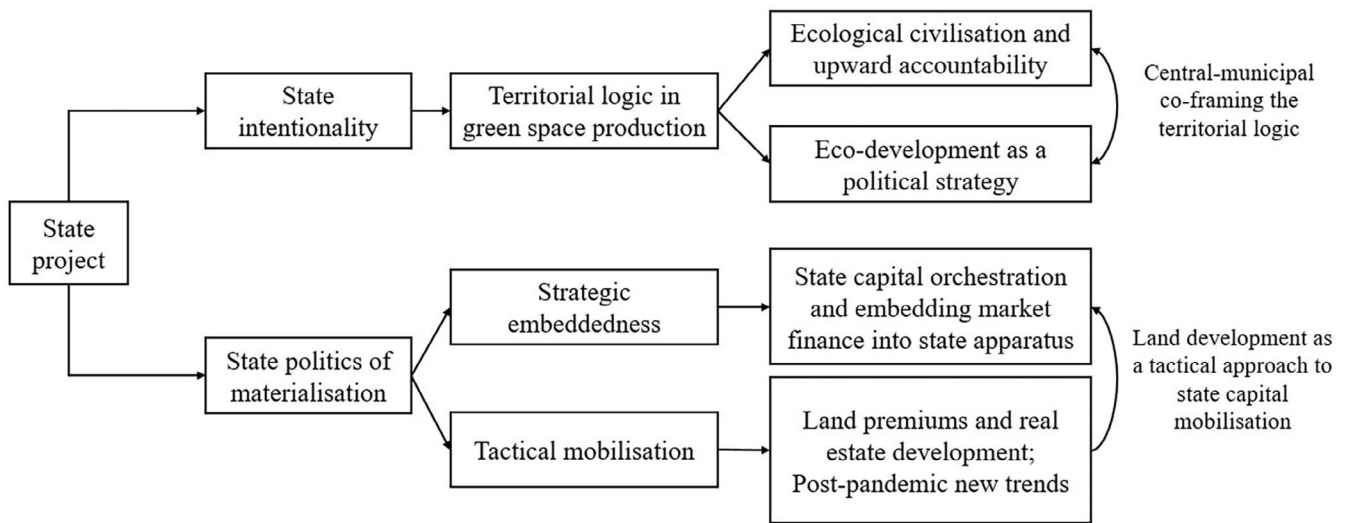


FIGURE 1 | The state project of green space production in China (source: Authors).

green infrastructure. Civic organisations, lacking a track record, cannot secure additional financing from capital markets. They turn to the private sector and rely on commercial events, sponsorships and catering licences in the parks. This consolidates the capitalist logic.

However, capital domination has yet to depict a fuller picture of green space production, especially the role of the state. The state has demonstrated multiple logics. Even in the core of capitalism, the imperative to improve urban environments has been driven by public pressure, electoral politics and international pressure (While et al. 2004). Beyond a temporary sustainability fix, political rationalities warrant eco-state restructuring, which involves ‘the reorganisation of state powers, capacities, regulations and territorial structures around institutional pathways and strategic projects, which are (at least from the vantage of state interests at a given moment intimate) viewed as less environmentally damaging than previous trajectories’ (While et al. 2010, 80). At the local level, municipal statecraft adopts progressive agendas parallel to urban growth and portfolios beyond speculation (Lauermann 2018). Public corporate actors, such as municipal state-owned corporations, play a key role in these socio-ecologically progressive initiatives (Wansleben and Neumann 2024). They signal a ‘challenge to the hegemony of growth agendas within entrepreneurial cities’ (Lauermann 2018, 219).

Critically engaging with the ‘spatial fix,’ Ekers and Prudham’s (2015) ‘socio-ecological fix’ draws on urban political ecology to highlight the co-constitution of urban space through socio-ecological processes and their integral role in constructing political legitimacy (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). Urban greening thus is a political strategy whereby states and elites reconfigure space, manage populations and resources, redirect capital, control territories and reshape power relations (Cohen and Bakker 2014). This reflection aligns with broader political economy critiques of urban governance, raising critical questions about who controls the future of urban greening (Harvey 1996; Garcia-Lamarca et al. 2021; Long 2016) and challenging narratives that portray power as operating through a singular logic (Loftus 2020). Beyond capitalist centrality,

political ecology traditions from the Global South advocate for a more situated lens involving the everyday construction of state power (Lawhon et al. 2014).

Given these insights, the role of the state in green space production warrants context-sensitive analyses of state intentions and the politics of translating these visions into materiality, especially in settings at the ‘frontier’ of global capitalism, where there is ‘a pervasive capitalistic logic, but capitalism is yet to come’ (Wu et al. 2024, 780). In China, this means that ‘the turn to neoliberalism has not been full-fledged, even though the market forms have been aggressively imposed’ (ibid., 797).

3 | Green Space Making as a State Project in China

We situate territorial logic within China’s urban green politics and operationalise the concept of state entrepreneurialism, understood as the dialectic between capitalist and territorial logic in urban governance (Wu et al. 2024), by conceptualising the state politics of creating urban green spaces through strategic embeddedness and tactical mobilisation (Figure 1).

The territorial logic of green space production in China centres on maintaining state power and enhancing state capacity. State entrepreneurialism suggests that Chinese statecraft mobilises capital accumulation in service of this territorial logic (Wu et al. 2024). This logic has three major representations: modernisation as a national-state strategy, the centrality of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and upward accountability politics. The expanding political authority, or state apparatus, serves extra-economic goals and multiple governance rationales of Chinese statecraft (Deng 2023; Wu et al. 2022; Teo 2023).

Extra-economic state intentions have increasingly revolved around the ecological environment in the era of ecological civilisation. Initially a partial interpretation of China’s ecological traditions aimed at domestic audiences (Hansen et al. 2018), ecological civilisation was later embraced by top political leadership, established as a long-term national strategy after President Xi Jinping took office and written

into the Constitution in 2018. A growing body of literature has discussed ecological civilisation's ideological significance and policy impact (Chen 2025; Rodenbiker 2021, 2023). Domestically, it serves as a powerful strategy to address social discontent and legitimise state authority after entering the 'new normal' of slower economic growth (Beeson 2010). Internationally, ecological civilisation plays a role in constructing national identity, reinforcing China's global leadership and expanding extra-territorial sovereignty (Hansen et al. 2018).

Ecological civilisation reflects how the state's territorial logic seeks to mobilise market interests for development, rather than framing environmental protection as opposing development. It is not a degrowth agenda (Zhang et al. 2023). Environmentalism is leveraged as a foundational pillar of the state-framed ideology of eco-development as China's export- and investment-driven growth model reaches its limits. Regarding urban development, eco-development logics are aimed at stimulating domestic consumption, especially among the growing urban middle class (Rodenbiker 2023).

Furthermore, the party-state advances a vision of harmonising humans with nature, positioning itself as the primary agent addressing economic, social and ecological challenges, which is the ideological core of ecological civilisation (Chen 2025; Hansen et al. 2018). The multifaceted role of ecology in consolidating state power is evident in ecological territorialisation practices (Rodenbiker 2023), particularly ecological protection zones and 'red lines' (Lin and While 2022). Converting rural land and populations into urban areas is a popular approach. This is orchestrated by local governments, primarily municipalities that obtain land ownership or transfer-development-rights (TDR) of collectively owned rural lands (Chung et al. 2018; Shi and Tang 2020). The municipal government consolidates its power through local state urbanisation (Hsing 2010).

We aim to capture the nuanced dynamics of state domination through a situated analysis informed by everyday practices (De Certeau 1984; Lawhon et al. 2014) and political ecology (Loftus 2020). Notably, state entrepreneurialism posits that the state 'acts through the market' (Wu 2020), embodying an embeddedness perspective of state, market and society (Deng 2023). As an illuminating example, Chinese ecological territorialisation is intertwined with local state-supported entrepreneurial activities and land-based accumulation. Rodenbiker (2023, 77) notes the 'structural constraints surrounding land-based markets and political-economic opportunities to profit from land rents' faced by state, semi-state and private actors alike. The constraints are shaped not only by top-down directives but also by the overall political economy. However, the literature has yet to fully explain *why* the state acts through the market and *how* this is effective in practice.

To address the gap, we seek to render the concept of state entrepreneurialism more analytically robust through the concepts of strategic embeddedness and tactical mobilisation. The words 'strategy' and 'tactics' were originally used for the practices of the dominant and dominated groups, respectively (De Certeau 1984). The insight informs a view of state capacity not as imposed domination, but as outcomes of both state strategies

and a set of agencies operating within the political economy. This provides a lens to explore how the hegemonic state visions in green projects have been achieved in practice.

First, strategic embeddedness refers to the institutional integration of the market into the state apparatus to achieve the state's strategic goals. The concept addresses the *fundamental* 'why' question for critical parameters in state entrepreneurialism, such as the use of SOEs. Drawing on the literature of financialised urban governance (Christophers 2019; Feng et al. 2022; Smith et al. 2023), approaches to consolidating the territorial logic of green space production have adopted less territorially bound forms of state-capital reconfiguration. The urbanisation of the local state is supported by both territorialisation and deterritorialisation (Hsing 2010). In deterritorialisation, state power is detached from fixed administrative territories. Upscaled to national strategies, 'territorial urbanisation' is a centrally initiated party-state project, whose zoning technologies reflect a state-market dynamic rather than a neoliberal exception (Cartier 2015). This inspires a more relational understanding of territorial logic beyond spatial territorialisation.

Strategic embeddedness involves state ownership and state capital (Zheng and Huang 2018) in financing ecological projects. The 'strategic' dimension underscores the state's deliberate intent in implementing ecological projects, and 'embeddedness' captures the rationale for 'acting through the market' (Wu 2020). For instance, the recentralised interventions in urban environmental governance in China (Kostka and Nahm 2017) have influenced the 'structural constraints' by political economy (Feng et al. 2024b; Zhang and Wu 2024). Due to a need to maintain centrality, the state relies on SOEs as the primary implementers of land acquisition, infrastructure development, villager relocation and the operation of conservation projects (Rodenbiker 2023; Zhang et al. 2022).

Second, tactical mobilisation refers to the constrained manoeuvres employed by state agencies to mobilise external interests, especially market forces. It addresses the *practical* 'how' question on how state actions coordinate with other agencies. In China, capital raising has heavily relied on state land ownership in the era of land finance (Lin and Zhang 2015). Land value initiated state-capital formation and ecological improvements facilitated land appreciation. In earlier stages, land boosted state-owned development corporations' share value and served as collateral for financial borrowing (Cartier 2015; Lin and Zhang 2015; Feng et al. 2022). In a transition from land finance to financialisation in the 2010s, fictitious capital production increasingly relied on state-manipulated asset valuations beyond land values (Feng et al. 2024a). Financialised ecological transformation fuels a cycle of local government borrowing, large-scale construction and leveraged homeownership within green urban development (Theurillat and Graezer Bideau 2022; He et al. 2020). State agencies, including multiple government levels and SOEs, must negotiate to mobilise the interests of diverse stakeholders such as homeowners, developers, middle-class consumers and financial intermediaries, aiming to secure support and consolidate legitimacy. The financialised state-capital dynamics exemplify deterritorialised municipal state power, where market operations are no longer tied to fixed territories but are subject to flexible scalar reconfiguration (Cohen and Bakker 2014; Xu and

Chung 2024). An example is the multi-scalar regulation of bond issuance (Feng et al. 2024b; Li et al. 2023) to finance environmental projects.

Besides, the reconsolidated state power through ecological spaces entails a renewed understanding of the relationship between central and subnational governments. Chinese state politics emphasises political endorsement from top leadership and loyalty to the higher authority, namely upward accountability (Guo 2020). Meanwhile, hierarchical subnational governments frequently adapt higher-level directives to local interests (Chung and Xu 2021). There has been a persistent gap between central mandate and local implementation in coercive environmentalism and fragmented environmental authoritarianism. Recent scholarship advocates for a more nuanced perspective (Kostka and Nahm 2017), challenging the binary view of local governments as either passive recipients of central mandates or solely driven by growth-oriented entrepreneurialism. Municipal motivations are driven by a combination of upward accountability politics and eco-developmental logic, which is both market-driven and politically fuelled (Rodenbiker 2023; Zhang and Wu 2024). The experimental ethos echoes earlier eco-city and low-carbon city initiatives (Pow and Neo 2013), which increasingly blend national mandates with local strategies.

Analytically, we investigate the state intentionality of green space production and the state politics of materialisation (Figure 1). First, we examine how the centrally initiated vision of ecological civilisation was perceived and translated into a municipal-level state project. As discussed, it is essential to understand the co-evolution of municipal and central governments in foregrounding the territorial logic. We understand scale as 'specific processes and institutionalised practices that are themselves differentially scaled' (MacKinnon 2011, 21). The Chengdu municipality is the primary site of implementation, where policy discourses from higher-level central and provincial authorities converge with those of lower-level district governments. Second, we unpack the state politics of implementing greenway development through strategic embeddedness, primarily the bureaucratic environmental reconfiguration and SOE operation to consolidate state ecological governance, and the tactical mobilisation of real estate developers, investors, homeowners and consumers through financialised housing development.

4 | Researching Urban Greening in Chengdu

We triangulated data from field site observations, interviews and documents. Our fieldwork in Chengdu took place during 2018 and 2024, encompassing the park city's initiation and substantial implementation periods. We conducted 78 interviews in total, including government officials, managers from two state-owned greenway development corporations, planners and architects, real estate agents, consultancy staff, merchants, users of the greenway and residents. We were able to engage with every tier of the bureaucratic system except the central level. Officials were from the provincial, municipal, district and street office levels. At the municipal level, participants represented bureaus overseeing the park city initiative, urban planning, land use, housing and construction and ecological and environmental affairs.

The first stage of fieldwork took place from June to July 2018 and in December 2019, upon the initiation of the Tianfu Greenway. We conducted 24 interviews with government officials, planners, greenway development corporations and residents (Interviewees 01–24). We visited the pilot phase of the greenway. Following the fieldwork, we maintained contact with local planners, professionals and residents. From 2020 to 2022, we visited Chengdu and the greenway several times to trace the development.

The second stage of fieldwork took place from June to July 2023, October to December 2023 and September 2024. The timing was appropriate for a progress review, as the first-tier greenways had been completed and the larger ecological spaces were in progress. We had interviews with 56 participants (Interviewees 25–80), including 21 government officials, seven planners, nine SOE managers, nine private business owners, two scholars and six residents. We visited all sections of the 100-km Eco-zone circular greenway, several neighbourhood micro-greenways and major development projects.

Rhetorics and actions from different parties were cross-validated. Different levels of government officials were key informants providing policy formulation rationales and specific actions. We asked about their intentions, opinions and interests, including the local interpretation of central government policies and their relationships with other levels and bureaus of the government in the project. Importantly, municipal officials execute planning, regulation, operation and supervision of the two greenway development corporations. Local planners knew well about the government leaders' interests, market interests and details of planning and design because they translated government visions into spatial plans and collaborated with SOEs. We learned from SOE managers about the design, financing, construction and operation of the greenway. We interviewed private business owners in and around the greenway for their market activities and perceptions of policies. We asked residents about their perceptions, experiences and feelings of the greenway and their property interests (if applicable).

We also gained insights from second-hand documents and data sources. At fieldwork sites, we read master plans of Chengdu and the greenway, business plans and consultancy reports of the greenway and government meeting minutes. We obtained from open sources bond insurance documents and financial feasibility reports for the greenway project, Chengdu Statistical Yearbooks, official presentations and intellectual exchanges at four Chengdu Park City Forums between 2019 and 2024, and reports published on the government website, newspapers and online media. These documents allowed data triangulation of the interviews and site visits.

5 | State Intentionality

The municipal government issued its first Eco-zone environmental protection plan in the 2000s to limit urban sprawl. However, it was poorly enforced. From 2008, the municipality started clearing constructions to generate development land quotas to support concentrated industrialisation (Interviewee 66, July 2023). In January 2013, a municipal-level *Eco-zone*

Protection Law took effect. The legislation fixed a 133 km² construction-free zone and recognised a 54 km² regulation buffer zone. It reflected the first attempt at municipal centralisation to protect ecological resources and facilitate industrial upgrading to advanced services (Interviewee 55, November 2023).

In the early 2010s, several district governments built wetland parks and greenways within their administrative boundaries (Interviewee 66, July 2023). The district-level greenways incorporated entrepreneurial activities, including generating land transfer fees through enclosure and capturing revenues from ecological tourism (Interviewee 34, July 2023). However, the projects had uneven financial capacities and effects across districts. For example, the High-tech Zone built the Jinchenghu Lake following the relocation of the municipal government hall to the Financial City, located adjacent to the southern section of the circular greenway. The lake sparked an unexpected property appreciation and inspired others (Interviewee 52, July 2023). However, not all districts have sufficient fiscal revenues, and the quota of rural-to-urban conversion is regulated by higher authorities (Interviewee 65, July 2023). Many districts cannot maintain the parks they built (Interviewees 52 and 68, July 2023). By May 2017, 143-km district greenways had been built in the Eco-zone. The district greenways were not interconnected.

Fan Ruiping's arrival in April 2017 was a key moment. He proposed a grand greenway project at the metropolitan scale, which included a 100-km first-tier greenway¹ that connects the entire Eco-zone and is planned to extend across the whole municipality, namely the 'Tianfu Greenway' system (Zhang et al. 2022). Similar to Chinese local leadership seeking political recognition from the central government (Chung and Xu 2021), Fan framed this initiative as a demonstration project of 'ecological civilisation' (Interviewee 54, July 2023; Interviewee 53, November 2023; Interviewee 62, December 2024). In reality, the greenway project incorporated more substantive environmental and ecological targets than previous projects. As the project progressed, it also received greater central state interference, such as farmland restoration. This is not unique to Chengdu and reflects a national trend of reinforcing central supervision on local initiatives (Kostka and Nahm 2017). As discussed later, both central and municipal governments have demonstrated an enhanced rationality in incorporating ecological initiatives into the politically significant state project.

5.1 | Ecological Civilisation and Upward Accountability

The central government's 'top-level design' is pivotal. In February 2018, President Xi Jinping inspected Chengdu. On the waterfront of the man-made Xinglong Lake, he praised the eco-centred urban master plan. He stressed that urban development must incorporate ecological quality and build the 'park city.' The inspection was described by local bureaucrats as a milestone event for Chengdu due to the top political endorsement (Interviewees 60 and 70, November 2023). Chung and Xu (2021) note that local governments tend to leverage such experimental opportunities to unlock policy and resources from their superiors. Without clear directives from the central government, the Chengdu municipality associated the concept of 'park city' with

ecological civilisation after extensive consultations (Interviewee 35, 54, July 2023). In October 2018, the Party Secretary published an article in *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the CCP central committee) entitled 'Accelerating Building a Beautiful and Liveable Park City.' He expressed a strong determination that

Chengdu's greenway development would transform the entire city into a vast park, establishing a new urban development model aligned with the principles of ecological civilisation and steering the city's green economic transition.

Within this framing, the greenway was a 'tangible manifestation of ecological civilisation' (Interviewee 53, December 2023). A municipal planner recalled that,

...the municipality designated it to us [planners] as a political task because Fan wanted to build an impressive model project of improving the urban ecological environment, by increasing green and public spaces for citizens. We [planners] were not asked to consider economic cost-benefit balance because it was mainly a political achievement. ... Later, we had to consider the project's financial self-reliance because the investment was too large.

(Interviewee 54, July 2023)

From 2017 to 2019, the Party Secretary spent at least one day a month on the project, and he promoted his work in the media. He imposed ambitious progress targets, demanding that the 100 km first-tier greenway be completed by December 2019 (Interviewee 52, July 2023). In reality, it was completed at the end of 2021. His emphasis on speed stemmed from the uncertainty of his tenure in Chengdu, as local government leaders typically have a high turnover rate and they are eager to present impressive demonstrations. Fan also launched several campaigns to combat pollution (Interviewee 72, November 2023). For example, facilitated by the Jinjiang River Greenway project, he launched anti-pollution programmes to improve the water quality. In 2018, he launched an 'Implementation Programme for the Battle for Blue Sky' to address Chengdu's long-lasting air pollution issues. In 2019, Chengdu's annual good air quality days finally reached 287, with a rate of 78.6%. This was the city's best level since the enactment of the new national standards for air quality assessment in a decade.

Apart from personal political enthusiasm, the green strategy was driven by systematic institutional reconfiguration toward an eco-state (Lin and While 2022), reflecting multi-level state bureaucratic dynamics. Over the past decade, the central government has incorporated more extra-economic goals in local cadre evaluation criteria and introduced ecologically oriented institutional reforms. In 2015, it issued an *Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Civilisation*. In 2016, the central government introduced the *Green Development Index System* and the *Ecological Civilisation Development Assessment*. The reform updated performance assessment standards for government officials. The new binding targets for local cadres include

carbon intensity reduction, decreased pollutant emissions, improved air and water quality and increased forestation. GDP growth was removed from mandatory indicators.

Chengdu's experience reflects the system-wide restructuring to prioritise ecological objectives. When the greenway project was first launched, local officials mentioned increasing pressure regarding ecological preservation from higher authorities, such as the Ministry of Natural Resources (Interviewee 10, September 2019). These inspections have become increasingly frequent and stringent over the years, focusing on environmental protection, natural preservation and especially the restoration of arable farmland and ecologically fragile areas (Interviewees 48, 59, 69, July 2023; 73, November 2023). With intensified vertical connections in the bureaucratic system, the central state imposes more substantive regulation and supervision (Kostka and Nahm 2017).

Ecological goals have been institutionalised and have gradually become a daily routine for the local bureaucrats. After the Third National Land Survey in 2020, the municipal government reemphasised the ecological territorial protection goals: half of the 133-km² Eco-zone was dedicated to farmlands and the other half to ecological spaces, including wetlands, grasslands, forests and uninhabited islands for bird migration (Table 1). The Ministry of Natural Resources has monitored land use changes increasingly strictly and urged the local officials to restore farmlands to guarantee crop security (Interviewees 65 and 67, July 2023). According to Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources, the top principle has been safeguarding the ecological resilience of the area (Interviewee 74, November 2023; Interviewee 57, September 2024). Secondary goals, such as constructing growth corridors and recreational areas, are only considered when the primary goal is met.

5.2 | Eco-Development as a State Strategy

Top-down mandates convey a new vision of growth. The vision does not purely serve the accumulation regime but supports territorial logic, including geopolitical goals. The party-state has

TABLE 1 | Land use types in Chengdu Eco-zone (source: Adapted from Chengdu Eco-zone Ecological Restoration and Land Consolidation Implementation Plan).

Type	Area (km ²)	Proportion (per cent)
Farmlands	67.34	50.59
Grasslands, forests and wetlands	50.79	38.15
Water surfaces	7.53	5.66
Infrastructure	3.46	2.60
Greenways	2.00	1.50
Commercial facilities and public welfare amenities	2.00	1.50
Total	133.12	100

repositioned Chengdu's development objectives within the national security framework in response to escalating geopolitical tensions (Zhang and Wen 2022). During the Cold War, Chengdu was a major city in the 'third front' programme, prioritising inland regions over the 'first line' coastal areas considered vulnerable to foreign military invasion. The 'third front' ethos has been revived since the Sino-US trade dispute and the COVID-19 pandemic. The central government designated Sichuan Province as a 'strategic backup base' to ensure supply chain resilience and self-reliance (Interviewee 53, December 2023; Interviewee 79, September 2024). This strategic reorientation includes positioning Chengdu as a vital agricultural production hub to bolster resilience and food security (Interviewee 62, November 2023). Besides agriculture, developing emerging strategic industries has become a pivotal task for both central and local governments, facing insecure supply chains (Interviewees 70 and 80, November 2023). In 2015, Xi Jinping's leadership coined the concept of 'Chinese-style modernisation,' associating development with national rejuvenation and ecological civilisation. The country needs a new growth strategy to revive the national identity as a forerunner in clean, circular, sustainable and innovative development.

Associated with geopolitical recalibration, the central government envisions Chengdu as a 'bridgehead' for inland economic opening along the Belt and Road Initiative, echoing Shanghai's pioneering role in coastal opening-up after 1990 (Wu 2003). With these national mandates, the central government poured resources and financial quotas into Chengdu (Zhang and Wen 2022), which ignited massive construction and urbanisation as the canvas for green spaces.

The municipality is not the passive recipient of top-down design. Although greenway development was elevated to Chengdu's overarching municipal strategy after Xi's 2018 inspection, the citywide 'Tianfu Greenway' was launched in 2017. Since 2019, the municipal government has held the annual 'Park City Forum' and invited scholars, mayors, experts, planners and representatives from cities, international institutions and the private sector (Interviewee 46, June 2023; Interviewee 33, September 2024). Furthermore, Chengdu's state planners and officials constantly promoted the 'Park City' model at global events, such as the UN-Habitat World City Forum, to demonstrate the advantages of Chinese solutions to sustainable cities (Interviewee 58, September 2024). It has been a political task to build a sustainable identity and gain geopolitical advantages. The political significance culminated in July 2023 at the World University Games held in Chengdu (whose main site was a newly developed ecological park) when President Xi Jinping gave a speech at the welcoming banquet of the opening ceremony. This represented another official endorsement (Interviewee 49, July 2023) where global visibility was leveraged for garnering central support (Xu and Chung 2024), discursively connecting Chengdu's 'Park City' model with 'Chinese-style modernisation':

I encourage you to tour the city, to experience and share firsthand the multifaceted manifestations of the Chinese path to modernisation.

(Xi 2023)

Behind the central recognition were years of upward mobilisation (Interview 32, September 2024). Upon the inception of the

World University Games, the municipal and central governments reached a certain degree of consensus on framing the ‘park city’ as a green business card and promotional window to the global audience, provided that the municipality improves the ecological environment and develops strategic industries aligning with the central government’s priorities (Interviewee 56, September 2024). According to the Greenway Construction Corporation managers,

We felt more assured after the opening ceremony because the top leadership finally recognised us [the greenway project]... This has been part of the plan from the beginning. The [municipal] leaders wanted to generate economic benefits from the citywide industrial upgrading. They have asked us to make the greenway a ‘green lounge’ for the city, hosting international business partners, government representatives and research groups.

(Interviewee 49, July 2023)

The municipal government promotes eco-development logic (Rodenbiker 2021) to the public and market, highlighting its economic potential and the significance of maintaining state centrality in the green transition. Urged by the Party Secretary, the municipality promulgated an urban upgrading strategy, with a slogan of ‘people-city-industry’ (*ren-cheng-chan* in Chinese) (Interviewee 60, November 2023). The first step involves developing green infrastructure and amenities to create a liveable urban environment. Second, the improved urban ecological quality is anticipated to attract talented people, particularly college graduates and young professionals, with skills and knowledge required by higher value-adding industries such as Research and Development (R&D) and artificial intelligence (AI) (Interviewees 55 and 59, November 2023). This outlines a bold roadmap for leapfrog development to bypass low-value-adding manufacturing industries and transition directly to advanced service sectors. Municipal officials and planners describe the greenway as a ‘magnet’ for attracting talent and advanced industrial agglomeration (Interviewees 46 and 58, June 2023). For example, alongside the waterfront of the Xinglonghu Lake, a high-profile 67-ha ‘Unicorn Island’ was developed. It is an industrial park designed for start-up exhibitions and conferences to incubate ‘unicorn’ tech companies. The state-owned developer invited Zaha Hadid Architects to design the ‘Unicorn Island’ and invested RMB 18 billion to construct a net-zero industrial park on the island.

The economic strategy was motivated by political incentives rather than public–private business partnerships or local economic interests. It has been increasingly directed by the central government. When talking about whether the political shuffle influenced the greenway project, since Fan’s tenure ended in 2021, the municipal officials commented that Chengdu’s business card as the ‘park city’ demonstration zone is not influenced because it was endorsed by President Xi, just as ‘ecological civilisation’ (Interviewee 70, November 2023). The municipal government is seeking a more substantive alignment with the central government to secure more political support. The territorial logic of the green urban project has been reinforced by the

party-state political dynamics, including municipal and central governments.

6 | State Politics

The municipal state and its market agents have been the primary implementers. First, the state *strategically* embedded market finance into the state apparatus by deploying SOEs and orchestrating financial borrowings. Construction fees of the greenway were raised and cross-subsidised across the entire municipal-owned state–capital system. Second, the state *tactically* mobilised real estate interests and actors to extract land revenues to repay the borrowings. This created a temporary greenway growth coalition, bringing together developers, district governments, middle-class homebuyers, property owners, investors and speculators.

6.1 | Strategic Embeddedness

With the Tianfu Greenway being designated as the ‘number one’ project, resource mobilisation was initiated through the formal state organisations and then penetrated through market operation. First, the municipality set up new committees and bureaux of greenway development, following the central-initiated environmental institutional reconfiguration. In 2017, a leading group of Tianfu Greenway Development was established. The director was a vice mayor. Second, in June 2017, the municipality appointed a state-owned development corporation, the ‘Greenway Construction Company,’ as the greenway developer. After construction, the greenway would be transferred to the ‘Greenway Operation Company’ for daily maintenance and operation. Both have been newly established subsidiaries of the municipal-owned Chengdu Xingcheng Investment Group Co. Ltd. (‘Xingcheng’ hereinafter).

The greenway corporations are the municipality’s primary agents in delivering the greenway. They extend the municipal state’s reach to property development and commercial services. The Greenway Construction Company orchestrates the planning, design and construction of greenways and liaises with planning institutes, architectural design companies and business consultancies on behalf of the municipal government (Interviewees 50 and 52, July 2023). The Greenway Operation Company develops business promotion plans and maintains entrepreneurial operations (Interviewees 46 and 47, July 2023). They take advantage of the market entity status to negotiate with business partners more flexibly than government agencies (Interviewee 77, November 2023). The municipal state sets the primary principles in the development plan while leaving the details to market experts. The basic principles are about the strategic objectives, including the proportion of public welfare amenities and farmlands (Interviewees 48, 65, 67, July 2023; also see Table 1). The officials commented that SOEs enable optimised materialisation through commercialised operations without impeding the extra-economic objectives (Interviewee 65, July 2023; Interviewee 43, September 2024).

Beyond leveraging market expertise, the SOEs facilitate the reconcentration of planning and financial authorities from

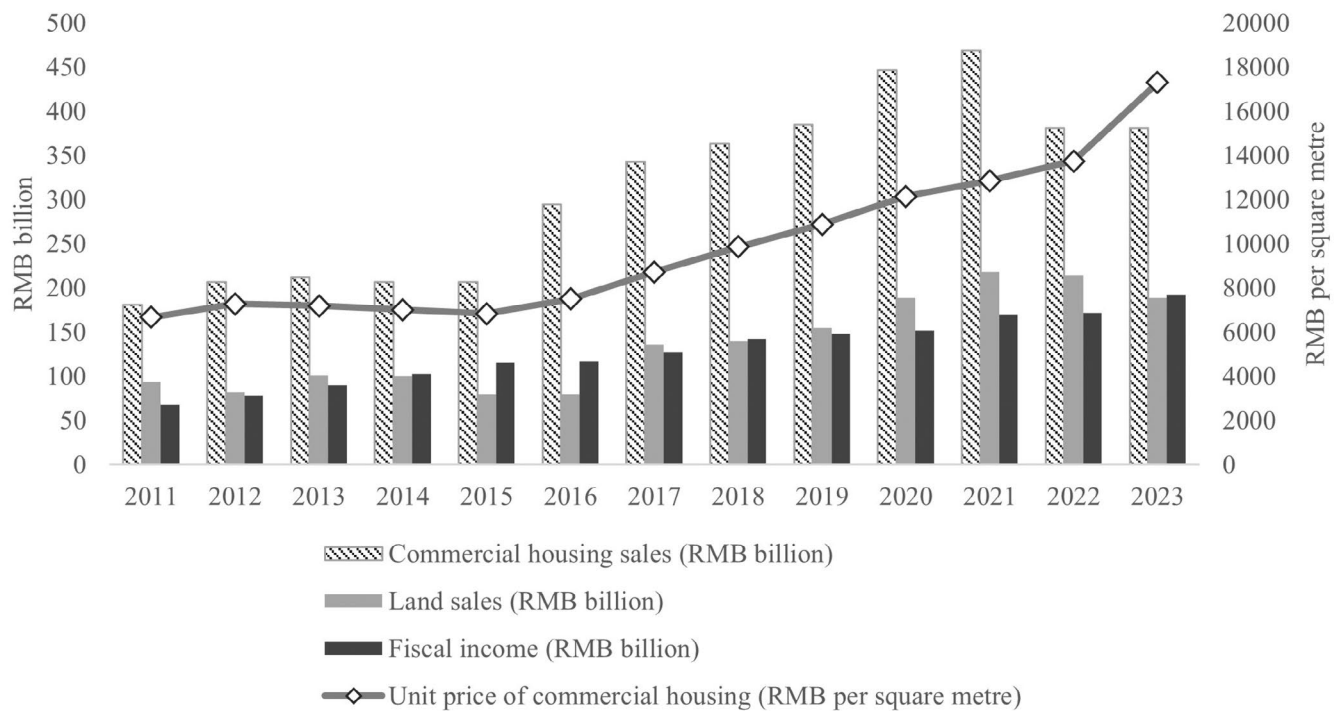


FIGURE 2 | Commercial housing sales, land sales and fiscal income of Chengdu (source: Compiled based on data from Chengdu Statistical Yearbooks).

villages and district governments to the municipal government. The Greenway Construction Company has gradually taken over the use rights of rural-collectively owned lands in the eco-zone from villages. Supported by the municipal government, the company signed land leasing contracts with village collectives (Interviewee 10, July 2023). This enabled the municipality to envision, plan and design the 133-square-kilometre eco-zone as a unified, large-scale project. The municipal government now directly redistributes economic benefits—primarily land sale revenues—among district governments and greenway corporations (Interviewee 49, July 2023).

District governments undertake the task of villager relocation and land clearance as important approaches to ecological enclosure (Rodenbiker 2020). The municipal government has provided economic incentives to district governments: within the ‘specially designated development areas’ located along the greenway buffer zones, districts were permitted to retain 90% of the land sale proceeds (Interviewee 75, November 2023). Although the district governments are still required to contribute one million RMB per *mu* to the greenway corporations, the remaining revenues remain substantial (Interviewee 41, July 2023). Twelve district governments accelerated relocation relative to the pre-2017 period. By 2021, a total of 217,000 Eco-zone villagers had been relocated (Interviewee 65, July 2023).

Unlike district governments, the two greenway corporations cannot profit from land development. Due to environmental regulations, they cannot build developmental projects in the Eco-zone (Interviewee 24, July 2023). The sole exception was the municipal government’s grant of two square kilometres of dotted plots to the Greenway Operation Company, designated

for the construction of essential services and business facilities (Interviewees 54 and 65, July 2023). The company is expected to offset maintenance costs through operational revenues generated from these designated plots.

Importantly, the greenway corporations have been financed through a cross-subsidised state–capital system. According to the implementation plan, the Eco-zone greenway’s total construction fee would reach RMB 41 billion. This does not include the costs of RMB 67 billion to compensate the villagers and prepare the land. By comparison, Chengdu’s municipal fiscal revenue in 2023 was RMB 192.9 billion (Figure 2). It was impossible to finance the green infrastructure solely with fiscal funds.

The multi-scalar state offers extra-budgetary funds through local government bonds (LGBs) and SOE corporate borrowings. First, the state provides direct financial support through LGBs apart from fiscal allocation. LGBs have been the only primary legal means of local government borrowing in China since 2015 (Li et al. 2023). The provincial government (higher level of state authority) issued LGBs on behalf of the Chengdu municipal government. The municipal government subprimely lent to Xingcheng, who then sub-lent to the greenway corporations. The money was recorded on Xingcheng’s balance sheet as ‘accounts payable’. From 2019 to 2022, a total of RMB 10 billion LGBs were put into the Eco-zone greenway project. Besides, the municipal government redistributed a 1-billion-RMB LGB from the Jinjiang River Greenway project to the Eco-zone Greenway. Therefore, financial balance was achieved at the municipal level through a vast and complex capital system, with cross-subsidies extending beyond individual state-owned enterprises or development projects.

Second, Xingcheng issues corporate bonds for the greenway project, including RMB 5 billion domestic enterprise bonds and USD 3 billion green bonds from the international financial market. As new entities without a track record, the greenway corporations could not secure loans from the capital market (Interviewee 49, July 2023). Xingcheng issued bonds on their behalf, leveraging the expanded portfolio of state-owned assets after a new round of municipal SOE restructuring in May 2017, only a month after Fan Ruiping assumed office. Xingcheng expanded its capital asset pool, including real estate properties, through mergers and reorganisations. Xingcheng is a handy agent and instrument for state–capital raising. As a municipally owned SOE, it possesses larger capital assets and carries greater political significance than its district-level counterparts. Larger capital assets increase the collateral for bond issuance, and greater political significance provides implicit guarantees for financial credit. Compared to district greenways, the cost–benefit calculations have been upscaled and internalised within the municipality.

The financing has been state-orchestrated and reflected the strategic embeddedness of market finance into the state apparatus. Strategic embeddedness internalises financial capital into the territorial logic. In the greenway project, specific approaches have included reconfiguring bureaucratic and SOE organisations (Feng et al. 2024b), state-led creation of fictitious capital and internal subsidisation across the state–capital system (Zhang and Wu 2024). They constitute a state-centric mode of orchestration that contrasts with urban entrepreneurial public–private partnerships, as the funding leverage of the private sector is overshadowed by the capacity of the state–capital system. The complex financial orchestrations have spanned multi-level governments, SOEs and bond issuance bodies. The approaches have consolidated municipal authority over district governments and companies. The consolidated municipal capacity was, in turn, mobilised to realise extra-economic objectives and national mandates, especially ecological and farmland protection (Interviewee 69, July 2023).

6.2 | Tactical Mobilisation

The state's mobilisation tactics emerged from the imperative to repay the borrowings incurred for the greenway project. According to the implementation plan, the municipality expected to repay at least half of the LGBs with anticipated land premiums. In 2020, the Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources compiled a land resource survey report. The report estimated that 32,100 *mu* of undeveloped land remained around the Eco-zone (1 *mu* = 0.067 ha). Subsequently, the municipal government asked development projects in a designated buffer area to contribute one million yuan per *mu* to greenway construction. This would generate a total of RMB 32.1 billion in revenue. The contribution is transferred directly from the district governments, which handle land expropriation and sales, to the greenway development corporations' accounts and recorded as a construction fee (Interviewees 49, 65, July 2023).

Fund raising from developers contributed to Chengdu's state-led housing financialisation and the promotion of homeownership

with ecological amenities (He et al. 2020; Theurillat and Graezer Bideau 2022). A planner remarked that 'the municipal state has been fostering a common belief among homebuyers that properties beside a lake or greenway are valuable assets' (Interviewee 51, June 2023). During 2020 and 2023, dozens of 'future park community' housing estate projects were launched alongside the greenway. They were proposed by the municipal government and materialised by district government-led mixed-use development (Interviewees 50 and 65, July 2023). The estates target middle-to-high-class homebuyers who prefer natural amenities and low-density dwellings (Interviewee 51, June 2023).

The municipal government has increasingly positioned the greenway as a strategic space for clustering advanced consumption services associated with 'sustainable' lifestyles, including ecological tourism, creative industries, recreation, healthcare and sports. It consciously cultivates a sense of belonging based on consumption communities, targeting young talents and middle-class homeowners (Interviewees 49 and 50, July 2023). Under an 'integrated design approach', various functions are seamlessly integrated with green spaces. Larger construction plots adjacent to green spaces are used to build stadiums for sports games and live concerts. Smaller plots accommodate catering, luxury shops, art studios, vintage markets, farming, sports courts, cafes and exhibitions (Interviewee 52, July 2023). On 23 July 2021, at the Ninth Plenary Session of the 13th CCP Chengdu Municipal Committee, the municipal government announced a new branding slogan for Chengdu:

A park city at the foot of snow-capped mountains and
a happy city with hustle and bustle.

Note that the local party-state committee crafted the branding slogan, not market-based business coalitions. The slogan shows Chengdu's proximity to spectacular natural reserves located at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, appealing urban environments with vast green spaces, and an attractive quality of life with public amenities. The municipality adopts these branding and promotion techniques to mobilise economic interests. This facilitated a pro-growth coalition of real estate developers, homebuyers, speculators, lifestyle-oriented consumers and merchants. The tactics resemble those of the Western metropolitans (Walker 2016; Lang and Rothenberg 2017; Levenda and Tretter 2020). Middle-class consumers engage in the state-led green gentrification (Gould and Lewis 2016), with amenities and services created in park communities (Interviewee 58, June 2023). This increased social injustice by potentially reducing entry opportunities for less advantaged migrants through market forces (Long 2016) and marginalisation (Rodenbiker 2020).

Meanwhile, the municipality's primary objective is not land revenues (as it has receded 90% to district governments). The vision is to attract well-educated professionals to Chengdu and upgrade the industrial structure into advanced manufacturing, creative culture and technological industries (Interviewee 65, July 2023; Interviewee 55, November 2023). By institutionally separating greenway corporations from real estate developers (including SOEs), the municipal leadership 'centralises decision-making power and aligns diverse

agents with strategic priorities' (Interviewee 69, July 2023), in contrast to the decentralised governance typical of neoliberal public-private partnerships (Lang and Rothenberg 2017; Levenda and Tretter 2020).

In this regard, the *strategic* and *tactical* dimensions of state actions differ from the vantage point of the municipality. *Strategic* actions derive from the imperative to implement political strategies and mandates. They have embedded market entities, such as the greenway development corporations, and financial orchestrations into the state apparatus. In contrast, financialised land and housing development reflects the *tactical* mobilisation of market and business interests to subsidise the large-scale greenway project. It has paradoxically reinforced a financial logic and excessive capital fixation in the built environment (He et al. 2020). Land and property development approaches have been mainly tactical and shaped by the political-economic conditions of financialisation in the latter half of the 2010s. The land income targets have been uncertain, especially after the pandemic. Central regulations have prohibited the repayment of corporate bonds through revenues generated from land transfers. LGBs are ultimately underwritten by national sovereignty and reflect the central government credit (Li et al. 2023).

There have been signs of a shift in the tactic of mobilisation. First, developing consumption spaces and advanced industrial spaces along the greenway gains unprecedented significance in the recent real estate downturn when land income becomes less reliable for securing long-term financing (Interviewee 49, July 2023). Second, geopolitical tensions reasserted security goals. The municipality has shifted the focus from landscaping to farming (by strictly following the planning targets in Table 1) to guarantee food security. Despite complaints from the pro-growth coalition of developers, homeowners and investors, the municipality reiterated the significance of food security for ecological civilisation (Interviewee 67, July 2023). The state did not commit to a growth coalition or an emergent property-owning class (if such a class existed at all). Regarding farmland restoration, the greenway corporations have combined administrative and entrepreneurial approaches to creating aesthetic agriculture and educating citizens (Interviewees 46, 47, 65, July 2023). The territorial logic has been reinforced through flexible yet economically constrained mobilisation techniques.

7 | Conclusion

The paper has revealed how a state-driven initiative to create green spaces advances a political vision rooted in territorial logic. China's green space production reflects a territorial logic articulated through the state's hegemonic ecological visions, casting Chengdu as a bridgehead for inland regional development and an ecologically oriented development model with (geo)politically promotional value. State politics is underpinned by the strategic embeddedness of market power within the state apparatus, facilitated through large-scale coordination of state capital (Feng et al. 2022). The development of real estate and land around the greenway shows the tactical

mobilisation of developers, district governments, homebuyers and investors.

The findings contribute to the literature on urban entrepreneurialism, statecraft of urban governance and political ecology. First, the study contributes to the urban entrepreneurial governance literature by showing how market techniques are mobilised for extra-economic visions. It underscores the significance of political rationalities, an emphasis initially identified in the literature on capitalist sustainability fixes (While et al. 2004; Levenda and Tretter 2020) but later overshadowed by the predominance of financialised speculation in built environments (Lang and Rothenberg 2017). The findings advance the conceptualisation of extra-economic state intentionality by contextualising 'territorial logic' (Arrighi 2007; Harvey 2006) in China, detailing an urban green project tied to the ruling party's maintaining ideological and sovereign centrality while achieving strategic goals ranging from ecological quality to green development. The territorial logic of Chengdu's greenway development exemplifies urban greening politics shaped directly by state visions and actions, distinct from the new urban politics catering to mobile global capital (While et al. 2004). In comparison to 'territorial urbanisation' (Hsing 2010), territorial logic represents the logic of governance, which is in dialectic to capitalist logic and not confined to the spatial-bounding practices of controlling terrain.

Second, the study contributes to the growing literature on statecraft in urban governance (Lauermann 2018; Pike 2023; Teo 2023; Wu et al. 2024, 2025) by operationalising state entrepreneurialism through strategic embeddedness and tactical mobilisation. State entrepreneurialism (Wu 2018) departs from varieties of urban entrepreneurialism (Phelps and Miao 2020) while resonating with recent work on municipal statecraft examining entrepreneurialism's role in territorial politics (Wansleben and Neumann 2024; Lauermann 2018; Thompson 2023) and the managerial role of the state (Jonas 2020; Jin and Shin 2025). The study foregrounds a grounded, historical-materialist (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Harvey 1996) understanding of state capacity. While prior studies have examined *what* administrative and financial approaches the state adopts (Christophers 2019; Feng et al. 2024b), strategic embeddedness clarifies *why* SOEs serve as primary implementers, anchoring state actions in the often non-negotiable extra-economic interests with territorial logic. Tactical mobilisation shows *how* these approaches work, situating state agencies and regulatory flexibility within the political economy (Sun et al. 2024; Deng 2023). The conceptualisation contributes by breaking the dichotomy between state-capital collusion or opposition (Zhang et al. 2020) and showing that state entrepreneurialism, when understood as a governance mode (Wu 2018), is not a one-way relationship between state and capital. The state participates directly in market operations and raises capital, while market-based implementation demands adaptive tactics aligned with the logic of financial borrowing, corporate auditing and project viability. In the territorial-capitalist dialectic, national strategies are not always coherently planned or effectively executed. Such dialectical tension is a symptom of the state's attempt to assert strategic dominance through market-making (Qian et al. 2025).

We believe that the concept of strategic embeddedness can be extrapolated. In Polanyi's (1944) Western capitalism studies, 'embeddedness' means that society embeds the market (either as a historical default or as a reactive 'counter-movement'), but we are describing a deliberate strategy where the state embeds the market for its own ends. The strategic embeddedness perspective also provides a useful lens for understanding how the state mobilises community groups to maintain ecological spaces, relevant in both Western post-2008 austerity settings (Smith et al. 2023) and in post-pandemic China (Teo 2023; Wang et al. 2025), leveraging society while strengthening state authority.

Third, this study extends the literature on ecological governance by analysing the politicised production of green space in China, resonating with recent calls within Chinese ecological governance scholarship 'not to simply villainize China as an outlier in the global gambit' (Rodenbiker 2023, 14). The findings enrich theorisation by showing how the strategic interests of political elites shape a hegemonic vision distinct from capitalist (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003) and post-colonial (Lawhon et al. 2014) experiences. Engagement with everyday practices (De Certeau 1984) and Southern perspectives in urban political ecology (Lawhon et al. 2014) contributes to a more situated understanding of state power (Loftus 2020) by critically fostering dialogue between the structural focus of historical-materialist traditions (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003) and the everyday emphasis on agency. Relatedly, future inquiries into environmental injustices linked to large-scale greening projects (Gould and Lewis 2016; Garcia-Lamarca et al. 2021) require alternative frameworks to analyse uneven distribution, deprivation and contestation beyond the abstract state-capital collusion.

Re-centring state politics (Zhang et al. 2022, 2024) and material processes offers a timely understanding of multi-scalar ecological governance (Chung and Xu 2021; Xu and Chung 2024; Zhang and Wu 2024). Engaging scalar dynamics through a territorial-capitalist dialectic, the eco-scalar process (Cohen and Bakker 2014) through which state green politics becomes 'urban' is grounded in the realms of the real estate market, state capital and finance (Castree and Christophers 2015). The territorial logic of Chengdu's greenway has been shaped by state actions across scales, including the municipal government's pursuit of political-economic goals and the central state's heightened focus on ecological regulation. Across China, provincial governments also play an active role in urban and regional environmental governance (Liu et al. 2024; Feng et al. 2024b). These rescaling practices have jointly reconsolidated the state power that does not solely operate at the central level. While recognising place-sensitive configurations, this study highlights the conceptual insight of a more holistic and enhanced state role in urban ecological governance research (Zhang et al. 2023).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹ The completed length of first-tier greenways reached 133 km.

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