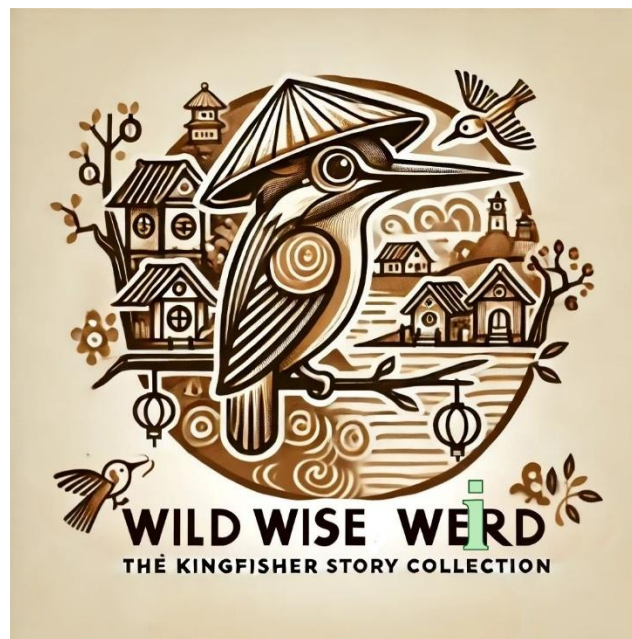


Green Talk, Hollow Walk? Corporate Environmental Publicity and the Reality of Innovation in China

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“He was recognized by his fellow villagers as a powerful and knowledgeable figure. The more other birds praised him, the more he wanted. At some point, Kingfisher wanted all the praises and flatteries he had received to become official, and his merits would be widely introduced to the whole Bird Village.”

In “Accolades”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]



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As climate concerns intensify, corporations increasingly promote their environmental credentials through annual reports, media campaigns, and sustainability disclosures [2-4]. But do these green declarations truly reflect meaningful environmental action? A recent study by Lai et al. [5] examines this question using data from Chinese A-share listed companies between 2008 and 2020. The findings reveal a troubling gap between corporate environmental rhetoric and innovation practice.

The study shows that while corporate environmental publicity (CEP) does correspond with an increase in green patent output, most of this growth stems from strategic—not substantive—innovation. Strategic innovations, such as green utility model patents, are typically low-cost, low-risk, and designed more to enhance corporate image than to deliver real environmental impact [6]. In contrast, substantive innovations, measured through more rigorous invention patents, saw little improvement [7].

Four key mechanisms were identified as driving this divergence:

1. Greenwashing – firms exaggerate environmental efforts to satisfy public and investor expectations.
2. Reputation management – companies focus on superficial outputs to maintain an eco-friendly brand image.
3. Subsidy incentives – public funds are often awarded based on perceived commitment rather than proven outcomes.
4. R&D manipulation – firms adjust reporting or redirect resources to appear innovative without genuine progress.

Notably, the tendency toward superficial innovation is more pronounced among heavily polluting firms. However, ISO14001-certified companies, recipients of rigorous government subsidies, and firms located closer to environmental regulators were more likely to pursue substantive green innovation. These findings highlight the importance of regulatory context and organizational culture in shaping corporate environmental behavior.

The study cautions against overreliance on corporate self-disclosure as a measure of environmental performance. Without stricter reporting standards, independent evaluations, and better-aligned policy incentives, environmental publicity may serve more as a tool for reputation management than for sustainability transformation.

In the delicate balance between economic ambition and ecological responsibility, intentions must be matched by verifiable actions. The nature–human nexus demands not only words but accountability, transparency, and authentic commitment to sustainable innovation [8,9].

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