

PURCHASE RESTRICTIONS AS GOVERNANCE TOOLS IN HAINAN FREE TRADE PORT

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Abstract

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This study conducts a thematic analysis with the help of a systematic literature review (SLR) based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The aim of the study is to analyze how Purchase Restriction Policies (PRPs) have been used as governance instruments in Hainan Free Trade Port (Hainan FTP). Hainan's FTP similarly treats regulatory tools as part of a broader state-building experiment, not an isolated housing control (Chi, 2021; Huang, 2021). A total of 19 studies, all published between 2015 and 2025, have been included in the review, which focus on five distinct yet interrelated themes. Core themes include reforms, soft-law governance, and bureaucratic adaptation, which are also for ensuring stability, policy equity, and trust. This institutional view is consistent with studies that link housing controls in Hainan to improving administration and environmental safeguards (Wei, 2022; Dong & Bian, 2024). The study found Hainan's PRPs show a major institutional shift. Policies are not just for managing speculation; they have been embedded into a larger structure that focuses on bureaucratic restructuring, legal experimentation, and environmental governance for building trust. So, PRPs are an excellent tool that is used for designing institutional ecosystems for future generations in every context.

Keywords: Hainan Free Trade Port, Purchase Restriction Policies (PRPs), Reform, Soft-law Governance, Bureaucratic Adaptation, Legitimacy, Stability, Trust, Equity

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Hainan Free Trade Port (Hainan FTP) has emerged as a strategic site of institutional experimentation within China's broader trajectory of market reforms. Positioned at the intersection of liberalization and governance modernization, Hainan's transformation from a peripheral province into a flagship reform zone reflects China's ambitions to explore new models of regulatory governance, sustainability, and global integration. Central to this evolution is the deployment of Purchase Restriction Policies (PRPs): instruments

traditionally associated with stabilizing speculative housing markets but increasingly framed as tools for administrative behavior management, institutional reform, and environmental sustainability. The primary aim of this study is to thematically analyze how PRPs are discussed in academic and policy literature as tools of regulatory and institutional change. This requires moving beyond the conventional economic view of PRPs as short-term demand suppressants and instead viewing them through a governance lens — examining how they structure administrative incentives, institutional legitimacy, and soft-law experimentation.

Despite the proliferation of literature on PRPs, most studies tend to approach them as economic tools — with a focus on housing prices, tax revenues, and investment flows. Few analyze their implications for institutional change, rule enforcement, or administrative adaptation. This is a critical gap, particularly in light of China's broader interest in using the Hainan FTP as a pilot for rule-based governance.

This study contributes to the literature by:

- Reframing PRPs as instruments of governance modernization rather than mere housing market controls.

- Systematically mapping their usage across five thematic areas: institutional reform, soft-law experimentation, administrative transformation, legitimacy building, and citizen trust.

- Offering a replicable Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)-based methodology to assess how these themes emerge across peer-reviewed literature (2015–2025).

The findings are expected to inform both academic debates and policymaking, especially for jurisdictions exploring hybrid regulatory tools in fast-growing, institutionally fluid environments. By tracing how Hainan's PRPs operate across domains: legal, administrative, economic, and ecological, this review provides a holistic view of how statecraft is evolving under China's free trade governance experiment.

This study asks two key questions with the help of an institutional and experimental-governance framework:

RQ1: In what ways do PRPs in Hainan FTP function as governance instruments beyond housing control?

RQ2: How are these roles articulated across the 2015–2025 scholarship?

Using a PRISMA-based systematic literature review (SLR) for reviewing 19 studies, five repeating themes have been traced. A finding, which can be seen, is that PRPs are part of systems that are bureaucratic, legal, and ecological, and also for building legitimacy, which then offers guidance for other free trade zone/free trade port (FTZ/FTP) reforms.

The paper has been divided into the following sections. Section 2 lays down the theoretical framework of the study by drawing on existing literature. Section 3 details the methodology followed. Section 4 explains the findings from SLR, whereas Section 5 discusses them in line with existing literature. Section 6 concludes by reiterating the findings of the study and suggesting future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Purchase Restriction Policies in China: Historical context and national objectives

Historically, PRPs have been introduced in waves: the 2010 pilot across major cities, the 2016 expansion targeting overheated second-tier markets, and the 2020+ round aligned with high-level regulatory reform. Literature from this period, such as Li and Xu (2015) and Cao et al. (2015), primarily focuses on their efficacy in reducing speculation and controlling housing price inflation. Studies have also pointed out regional differences in impact, with stronger

effects that can be seen in first-tier cities (Liu & Li, 2025) and spillover effects for surrounding zones (Zheng et al., 2023; Wu & Li, 2018; Wu, Guo, et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Li & Huang, 2025; Zhao & Wang, 2024). For Hainan specifically, PRPs have been given a deeper role; these are not just economic tools but stand-ins for wider institutional engineering. Ports are therefore used as an experimental space for reforming talent, innovation, and organizational upgrading, not just a simple trade node (Huang et al., 2024). Establishing Hainan FTP in 2020, then started new regulatory reforms, a process which focuses on realigning regimes for land, tax, and investment for achieving long-term sustainability and global competitiveness. Hainan has used PRPs for constructing a predictable investment climate, a move which took place due to notes from Wang, Li, et al. (2024), Wang, Maysa, et al. (2024), and Zhao et al. (2023). These works reduce speculative pressures while being used for testing soft-law regimes via courts, investment regulation, and zoning. A national example for this deeper PRP use can be seen with Shanghai's pilot FTZ, which shows China has long used FTZs for trialing such reforms and has made it a model for others.

2.2. Governance literature: Statecraft, market intervention, and soft law

For understanding PRPs, a wider theoretical frame has been offered by using governance literature. For instance, scholars like Crowe et al. (2013) and Tantri (2012) have also done work on this, describing PRPs as statecraft mechanisms, which is a method used for allowing governments a way to guide market behavior without strict regulation. These represent soft law tools, which are administrative rules that often have not been made into law, but compliance is still achieved, which then happened because of bureaucratic guidance, and to get conditional market access. This function can be seen in Hainan, where its joint arbitration institutions and non-treaty legal innovations (Shengxin, 2022; Dong & Bian, 2024) show how PRPs have been serving as levers for rule experimentation and for building legitimacy, especially for situations where hard law is absent or politically difficult. Similarly, zone-based arrangements let regulators manage trade using flexible, non-legislated instruments. These same dynamics have been seen in ecological modernization literature, where Zhang (2025) and Zhou (2015) describe purchase restrictions connecting with environmental goals for limiting land use and for redirecting resources from speculative to productive sectors (Wang & Chen, 2025; Xia et al., 2025). Literature that focuses on urban governance and digital transformation (Wang, Maysa, et al., 2024; Liu & He, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024) also shows Hainan as a testbed for innovations that mix PRPs, fiscal tools, and digital mechanisms, which are used for reshaping administrative routines and investor behavior. This all lines up with regulatory theory work on China that positions such hybrid tools as part of an adaptive governance toolkit.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study carries out a thematic analysis, which comes from an SLR approach. For the SLR, it has been based on the PRISMA framework, as suggested

by Page et al. (2021). This procedure is one that is used for critically analyzing how PRPs have been implemented in Hainan. We have also done work on their governance and studied for the Hainan FTP. For this analysis, the review has a focus on five themes, which are distinct but also interrelated. The themes have a primary focus on areas like: reform, soft-law governance, bureaucratic adaptation, legitimacy, stability, policy equity, and trust. This methodology has been designed to ensure replicability, transparency, and accessibility, an outcome which took place due to using only open-access sources and a thematic lens that is clearly coded.

3.1. Possible alternative methods

A qualitative SLR has been chosen for foregrounding institutional interpretation, but alternative designs have also been considered. For example, a bibliometric analysis could have mapped clusters for PRP-FTP research. We have also done some thinking on a mixed-method review, which would have combined this SLR with interviews in Hainan for verifying the governance reading. A comparative case-study for Hainan vs. Shanghai FTZ would also have been suitable, but it was excluded, which took place due to access and length limits. These alternatives are noted here for clarifying the logic for method selection and for guiding future extensions of the study.

3.2. Thematic structure and review scope

The literature review was thematically structured into five pre-defined categories to assess the role and evolution of PRPs in Hainan’s governance ecosystem:

- Direct governance lens/Institutional reform: How PRPs support formal structural change in Hainan’s administrative and legal systems.
- PRPs as regulatory or soft-law instruments: How PRPs function as flexible, discretionary, or non-binding regulatory mechanisms.

• Bureaucratic reform and policy implementation: The organizational and procedural dynamics shaping how PRPs are operationalized.

• Legitimacy and stability via PRPs: How PRPs contribute to state legitimacy and public order.

• Citizen trust and policy equity: How PRPs impact perceptions of fairness and trust in the state.

This thematic framework informed both the design of the search strings and the classification of included studies.

3.3. Database selection and access criteria

Literature was sourced from three academic databases:

- Google Scholar (include articles with the exact phrase “Hainan Free Trade Port”;
- ScienceDirect (open access filter applied);
- JSTOR (only one open-access article qualified).
Included if:
 - the article was in English;
 - it directly addressed Hainan, PRPs, or closely related regulatory frameworks;
 - it was peer-reviewed;
 - it was open access (ensuring replicability and accessibility);
 - it fits at least one of the five themes (see below).
 Excluded if:
 - it was a thesis, conference paper, book chapter, or non-peer-reviewed;
 - it discussed China generally, but not Hainan;
 - it lacked institutional or policy relevance (e.g., purely macroeconomic);
 - full text was inaccessible.

3.4. Search strategy

Each theme was mapped to an exact Boolean search string using keywords aligned with Hainan’s PRP governance. The search strings and the number of articles found per string are given in Tables 1 and 2. The former shows the search strategy across JSTOR and ScienceDirect, the latter shows the same for Google Scholar.

Table 1. Search strings and number of articles found — JSTOR and ScienceDirect

Thematic framing	No. of studies	
	JSTOR	ScienceDirect
Direct + Governance lens/institutional reform:		
“Purchase restriction policy,” “institutional reform,” and “Hainan”	0	32
PRPs as regulatory or soft-law instruments:		
“Purchase restriction,” “soft law,” and “Hainan”	1	3
Administrative behavior and bureaucratic transformation:		
“Housing regulation,” “administrative behavior,” and “Hainan”	0	3
Legitimacy and stability:		
“Real estate regulation,” “social stability,” and “Hainan”	0	1
Citizen trust and equity:		
“Housing restriction,” “citizen trust,” and “Hainan”	0	3

Table 2. Search strings and number of articles found — Google Scholar

Thematic framing	No. of studies
PRPs and institutional reform in Hainan:	
“Hainan Free Trade Port,” “purchase restriction policy,” and “institutional reform”	186
PRPs as governance or soft-law instruments:	
“Hainan Free Trade Port,” “purchase restriction,” and “soft law governance”	64
Bureaucratic reform and policy implementation in Hainan:	
“Hainan Free Trade Port,” “bureaucratic reform,” and “policy implementation”	46
Stability and legitimacy via PRPs	
“Hainan Free Trade Port,” “purchase restriction policy,” and “social stability”	138
Citizen trust and policy equity:	
“Hainan,” “housing restriction,” and “citizen trust”	52

Search results were exported and manually filtered to remove irrelevant results and retain only those with conceptual alignment to the research objectives.

3.5. Screening: PRISMA process

The review process followed the PRISMA 2020 model, which was broken into four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

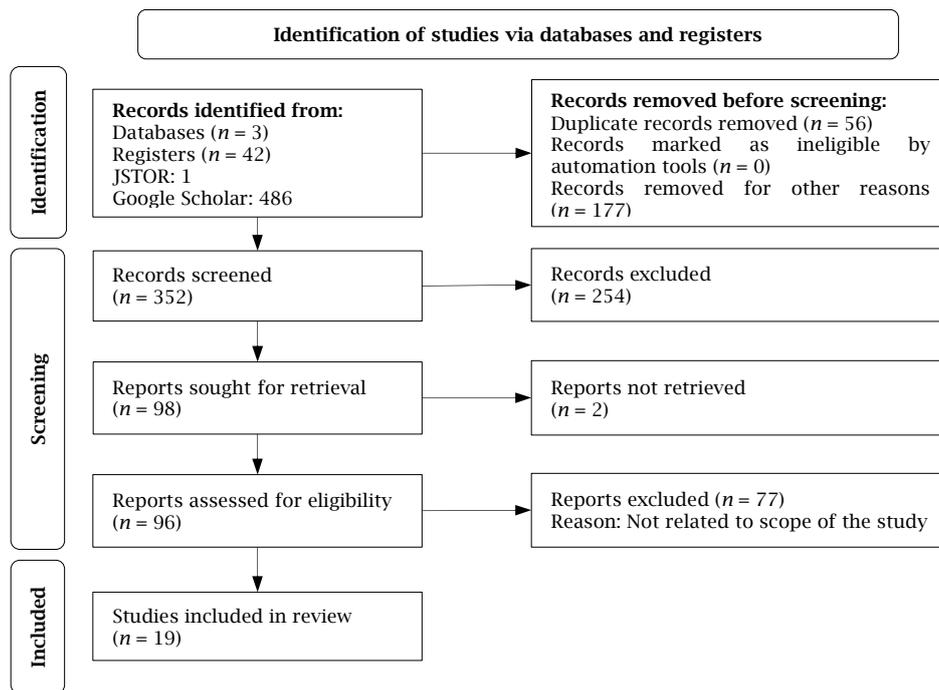
In this context, the number of records that were identified from each source has been shown in Table 3. The PRISMA flowchart in Figure 1

demonstrated that the transparent filtration process enhances the reliability and auditability of the review.

Table 3. Number of articles identified per source

Stage	Count
Records identified from Google Scholar	486
Records identified from ScienceDirect	42
Records identified from JSTOR	1
Total records identified	529
Duplicates removed	56
Records screened by title/abstract	352
Full texts assessed for eligibility	96
Full-text exclusions (not in scope)	77
Studies included in the final review	19

Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart



3.6. Search results by theme and source

The table below (see Table 4) summarizes the number of articles returned per theme from

each database, as well as the manually filtered totals that were retained for title and abstract review.

Table 4. Search results by theme and source

Thematic framing	JSTOR	ScienceDirect	Google Scholar	Total remaining after manual filtering
Direct + Governance lens	0	32	186	160
PRPs as regulatory or soft-law instruments	1	3	64	49
Bureaucratic transformation	0	3	46	30
Legitimacy and stability	0	3	138	81
Citizen trust and equity	0	3	52	32

Note: Many Google Scholar entries required manual vetting to exclude books, dissertations, and duplicate preprints. Only full-text accessible, peer-reviewed research articles were retained.

3.7. Full-text review and thematic coding

After initial screening, 96 studies were read in full. The final inclusion of 19 studies was determined through manual qualitative coding, where each paper was analyzed against the five themes. For each article, the following was extracted:

- direct quotation or paragraph;
- thematic match;
- analytical remark on its relevance.

3.8. Limitations

Subscription-based literature has been excluded, which may have limited access for some highly cited research. However, prioritizing open-access material was for ensuring all findings are publicly verifiable, accessible to all readers, and transparent in their methods. This review has also been qualitative, which focuses on understanding conceptual and institutional changes rather than outcome metrics.

3.9. Replicability checklist

Researchers can replicate this review by following these steps:

- 1) Search Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect (open access filter).
- 2) Use exact Boolean phrases listed in Section 3.
- 3) Limit results to English-language peer-reviewed articles from 2015–2025.
- 4) Remove duplicates and grey literature.
- 5) Conduct two-phase screening: title/abstract, then full text.
- 6) Use thematic tags across five pre-set categories.
- 7) Use a PRISMA flowchart to document each stage.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic quotes have been given in Table A.1 (see Appendix). Table A.1 presents the key truncated text extracts from the reviewed studies, organised under four themes to show how each author's evidence maps onto the thematic framework. It serves as an audit trail for the analysis by summarising representative quotes that underpin the interpretation of Hainan FTP's institutional design, policy implementation, governance challenges, and stakeholder responses. Table 5, in turn, shows the summarized findings from the textual analysis.

Table 5. Thematic findings based on textual analysis

<i>Author</i>	<i>Optimized remarks</i>
<i>Theme 1: Direct governance/PRPs and institutional reform</i>	
Zhou (2015)	Shows PRP-style, top-down greening exposes bureaucratic fragmentation and centre-local misalignment, illustrating the governance problem examined in this study.
Luo et al. (2020)	Links PRPs to environmental governance, stressing coordinated, rule-based control as a prerequisite for sustainable outcomes in this study's framework.
Fan and Yu (2021)	Demonstrates policy levers used to attract creative/film industries, evidencing PRPs as instruments for local institutional structuring.
Gao et al. (2022)	Depicts centralized governance with weak participation, supporting this study's claim that PRPs deliver fast but fragile reforms.
Zhao et al. (2023)	Shows International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC) built through administrative mandates, paralleling how PRPs integrate territory, sector, and bureaucracy in Hainan.
Dong and Bian (2024)	Frames Hainan FTP as a phased national reform, confirming PRPs as formal vehicles for compliance and capacity-building.
Xiu and Li (2023)	Argues FTP reform is economic and cultural, positioning PRPs as tools for long-term, state-led institutional transformation.
Wei (2022)	Identifies Hainan as a law-based experimentation site, aligning with this study's view of PRPs as systemic restructuring devices.
Luo (2022)	Shows arbitration and legal innovation, enabling PRPs, underscoring legality and legitimacy requirements within this study.
Zhu and Li (2022)	Treats duty-free PRPs as strategic fiscal-trade reform, evidencing state entrepreneurship and embedded risk-control systems.
Wang, Maysa, et al. (2024)	Demonstrates PRPs improving transparency and market liberalisation under central oversight, supporting the rule-based reform argument.
Wang, Li, et al. (2024)	Links Hainan FTP to cross-border cooperation, showing PRPs as platforms exporting Chinese regulatory models.
Zhang (2025)	Examines purchase-restriction PRPs curbing speculation and reallocating capital, illustrating developmental steering central to this study.
<i>Theme 2: PRPs as regulatory/soft-law instruments</i>	
Zhu et al. (2024)	Documents green-space, zoning, and ecological planning as PRP-like interventions buffering urban development pressures.
Chi (2021)	Conceptualises PRPs within special economic zones (SEZs) as soft-law, discretionary tools filling multilateral regulatory gaps — core to theme 2.
Huang (2021)	Shows CERI PRPs operate via selective exemptions and shared liability, confirming PRPs' flexible, soft-governance character.
<i>Theme 3: Bureaucratic reform and implementation</i>	
Khaskheli and Zhao (2025)	Details administrative streamlining, vertical coordination, and enforcement, illustrating PRPs' bureaucratic implementation pathway.

4.1. PRPs as instruments of institutional reform in Hainan

PRPs are used to curb speculation and push capital into productive/strategic sectors (Zhang, 2025; Dong & Bian, 2024).

Land-use and zoning shifts show the state steering real-estate demand toward green and duty-free development (Zhu et al., 2024; Zhu & Li, 2022).

Enforcement is backed by new legal bodies such as joint arbitration and localising regulatory power (Shengxin, 2022).

Ecological/spatial rules (marine zoning, sustainable development) are designed to work with PRPs (Luo et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022).

Hainan is framed as a policy-experimentation site for these combined reforms (Wei, 2022; Wang, Maysa, et al., 2024).

4.2. PRPs as regulatory or soft-law instruments

PRPs often act as sandbox, time-bound, discretionary tools (Huang, 2021). They operate in soft-law settings, coordinated by local agreements and agency discretion (Chi, 2021; Wang, Li, et al., 2024).

This flexibility enables linkage to digital/cross-border trade initiatives (Wang, Li, et al., 2024).

Soft clauses in regional protocols preserve room for data, platform, and market-access governance (Chi, 2021).

4.3. Bureaucratic reform and policy implementation in Hainan

PRPs have triggered internal administrative reorganisation and market-access commitment pilots (Khaskheli & Zhao, 2025).

Permitting and approvals are decentralised and streamlined for trade/bonded goods (Khaskheli & Zhao, 2025).

Digital, risk-based oversight supports ecological-zone enforcement (Gao et al., 2022).

Cadre performance is tied to responsiveness via smart-governance platforms (Tian et al., 2021).

Infrastructure/ecology projects face closer administrative review (Luo et al., 2020).

4.4. Legitimacy and stability via PRPs

PRPs are narrativised as equitable, sustainable, and rule-based, reinforcing state legitimacy (Zhou, 2015).

They temper speculative pressures in fast-growing cities like Haikou (Zhu et al., 2024).

E-government tools raise perceived fairness and responsiveness (Tian et al., 2021).

Reform language (modernisation, law-based rule) legitimises experimental enforcement (Wei, 2022; Wang, Maysa, et al., 2024).

Regional cooperation embeds PRPs in a wider stability and connectivity agenda (Wang, Li, et al., 2024).

4.5. Citizen trust and policy equity

Resistance often reflects missing consultation and procedural justice (Cui et al., 2020).

Top-down PPP/waste-to-energy projects show the same problem, signalling the need for participatory rollouts (Cui et al., 2020).

Trust improves when citizens join classification/monitoring tied to housing or spatial reform (Zhou, 2015; Zhu & Li, 2022).

Transparent environmental/marine data strengthens support for PRPs (Gao et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2023).

Comparative work warns that spatially selective PRPs can create inequity unless co-designed locally (Liu & He, 2024).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. How PRPs shape administrative behavior in the Hainan Free Trade Port?

In Hainan, PRPs are not simply for economic control. They are actually administrative instruments, which are used for reshaping bureaucratic behavior and for changing governance methods. Implementing PRPs has triggered new institutional tools that have been made in real time: market access, commitment mechanisms (Kashkheli & Zhao, 2025), joint arbitration platforms (Shengxin, 2022), and regulatory zoning frameworks (Gao et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Such innovations mean bureaucrats will do new tasks, like digital supervision, performance-based citizen responsiveness (Tian et al., 2021), and using governance models that are for managing risks in marine and environmental regulations (Luo et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022). Furthermore, this transformation, which can be seen in decentralizing enforcement, is a shift that took place due to local Hainan authorities taking over functions like licensing and trade approvals, which were previously handled by national bodies (Khaskheli & Zhao, 2025). Bureaucracy isn't just reacting to policy; it is actively engineering the institutional infrastructure that is

used for PRPs for their functioning. In this sense, PRPs act as catalysts for building state capacity and for modernizing governance in Hainan FTP.

5.2. Evidence of institutional maturity: PRPs for development, not just crisis management

A change can be seen from earlier Chinese regulatory trials, which took place due to controls often being reactive for issues like market overheating or unrest. In Hainan, PRPs are proactive tools that are used for development. Studies show these tools have been put into frameworks which are for sustainability, cooperation, and legitimacy — not just for correcting emergencies (Zhou, 2015; Wei, 2022; Wang, Maysa, et al., 2024). They have been placed for guiding a structural transformation, which focuses on shifting capital from real estate to services, tech, and even green industries (Zhang, 2025; Dong & Bian, 2024). This is a move for development management over simply crisis management. For example, PRPs have been used for supporting long-term spatial planning (Zhu et al., 2024) and for redesigning public-private infrastructure (Cui et al., 2020). They have also done work, which is used for aligning regional laws for partners in Ethiopia (Wang, Li, et al., 2024). PRP adaptability shows institutional maturity, which can be seen across soft-law regimes (Chi, 2021; Huang, 2021), digital trade zones, and ecological areas. And this has made it so these policy tools are now designed for long-term, multi-sector coordination. In this environment, administration will do things differently: shifting behavior from command-compliance for innovation, coordination, and continually refining policy.

5.3. Contrast with earlier SEZ models (e.g., Shenzhen: Growth at all costs)

The governance logic in Hainan is distinct from that of earlier SEZs in the context of a shift in paradigm. SEZs such as Shenzhen in the 1980s and 1990s focused specifically on growth-maximization. However, Hainan's governance focuses on legitimacy and sustainability. While the earlier models across Shenzhen tolerated institutional bypasses and prioritized speed and investment above everything else, Hainan's PRP-led regime integrates long-term legal scaffolding, equity concerns, and digital accountability. The earlier programs caused social and environmental fallouts. However, the recent governance regime in Hainan inculcates accountability in the process of reforms (Zhou, 2015; Tian et al., 2021). In Shenzhen, land conversion and the expansion of real estate were viewed as mechanisms of gross domestic product acceleration. In Hainan, however, housing restrictions and the land-use regulations are primarily designed to restrain the volatility of capital. It also protects ecological limits and prevents instability (Zhu & Li, 2022; Luo et al., 2020). Additionally, citizens' trust and procedural fairness also play a direct role in policy legitimacy. This is an issue that earlier SEZ literature is pretty scarce on (Cui et al., 2020; Liu & He, 2024). From a legal view, Hainan's approach also shows a broader shift, which can be seen in moving away from acting alone.

6. CONCLUSION

This study adds to a growing literature that focuses on seeing PRPs as a mechanism for governance. These are mechanisms that are embedded within larger institutional frameworks, not a simple tool that is used for just a narrow market control measure. Furthermore, a departure from older SEZ models can also be seen, such as Shenzhen's model, which focuses on maximizing growth. For Hainan, governance has been much more measured and participatory and has made it oriented for sustainability. This indicates an institutional shift for China's sub-national reforms, which are being designed, assessed, and then exported. For shedding light on this process, this study has subsequently brought together findings from five thematic dimensions, and it shows how Hainan's policy design uses PRPs for advancing certain objectives, mainly for building developmental, legal, and administrative legitimacy. A key takeaway has also been the multi-functionality of PRPs in Hainan FTP. This can be seen in their reshaping of administrative behavior, enabling legal experimentation, and signaling state commitment to reforms that are rule-based. They have also done much more than just manage real estate. Therefore, Hainan has been positioned as a policy frontier, which took place due to experimental governance being increasingly written into institutional practices. Lastly, the review has also opened new pathways for further inquiry. This research is important for future work, which can be seen because Hainan is a template for later free trade setups in China and for policy transfer for Belt and Road economies. For this reason, understanding PRPs as only housing tools misses their strategic value. This review has shown that PRPs in Hainan FTP have been more than devices for

anti-speculation; they have also been multi-purpose tools for governing. These are instruments that are used for helping a state pilot institutional, legal, and ecological reforms in a specific territory. The paper shows this by tracing five themes, which are: institutional reform, soft-law experimentation, administrative transformation, legitimacy building, and citizen trust, which show PRPs being embedded in wider frameworks for managing market and bureaucratic behavior.

At the same time, this study has several limitations that have been noted. A key issue is that it is a single case which focuses on Hainan, a place with a special ecological and geopolitical purpose, so for generalizing to other ports, we must be careful. The review has also done qualitative work, organizing how authors frame PRPs, but has done no testing for actual policy effects. Finally, the SLR was for open-access material only. This then happened to mean subscription-based Chinese journals and internal reports, which are rich in detail, could not have been included.

These limitations have pointed to three directions for research, which can be seen clearly. Future work will do things like pairing SLRs with quantitative evaluations, which are used for showing PRP impact on investment makeup, ecological indicators, and for fiscal revenue. They will also do comparative studies across Chinese FTZs/FTPs for identifying which parts of the Hainan model travel and which are specific to that place. Adding practitioner interviews is also key, which are used for verifying if officials see PRPs as instruments for administrative behavior. Doing this will then shift this paper's argument, which focuses on how PRPs can be governance tools, and has made it become a question of — here is how much and through which mechanism they actually work.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1. Thematic analysis text extracts

<i>Author</i>	<i>Truncated quote(s)</i>
Theme 1	
Zhou (2015)	“Compared to other [...] of the bureaucratic system”. “Ultimately, the [...] quality and sustainable GB program”. “The decade of [...] develop their own action plans”.
Luo et al. (2020)	“The construction of [...] deal with environmental problems”. “Building a free [...] green and sustainable development”. “Over the past [...] policies were shut down”.
Fan and Yu (2021)	“Hainan introduced the [...] considered operating in Hainan”. “The Hainan Island [...] international film island”. “Although Hainan has [...] lacking in production talent”.
Gao et al. (2022)	“The government of [...] lack of incentives”. “The Ministry of [...] ecological protection”. “Policy lag effect [...] become normal choices”.
Zhao et al. (2023)	“Many strategic and [...] promote the development of ILSTC”. “According to the [...] airport economic zone”. “The ILSTC is [...] corridor, platform, industry, and regime”.
Dong and Bian (2024)	“Hainan FTP is [...] step-by-step and phased manner”. “The construction of [...] laws, regulations, management and standards”. “Independent customs operation [...] free inside island principle”.
Xiu and Li (2023)	“The construction of [...] modern industrial and commercial development”. “Hainan has always [...] institutional innovation”. “In 2018 Hainan [...] non-registered families”.
Wei (2022)	“HNFTP aims at [...] changing international economic relations”. “The Hainan Free [...] eliminate legal barriers”. “HNFTP covers all [...] island-wide customs clearance operations”.
Luo (2022)	“Hainan can make [...] foreign arbitral institutions”. “Compared with the [...] advantage of legislative power”. “It is necessary [...] needs of Hainan Free Trade Port”.
Zhu and Li (2022)	“This is the [...] of tourism shopping”. “The implementation of [...] upgrading of Hainan’s tourism industry”. “With the rising [...] credit supervision systems”.
Wang, Maysa, et al. (2024)	“Hainan’s Free Trade [...] efficient and transparent trading environment”. “The goal of [...] free and open market environment”. “Examining how digitalization [...] effective digital transformation tactics”.
Wang, Li, et al. (2024)	“China can effectively [...] Chinese capital and knowledge”. “This could make [...] global supply chains”. “The synergies between [...] growth prospects for Africa”.
Zhang (2025)	“Hainan has emerged [...] policies were imposed”. “Purchase restriction policies [...] curbing speculative investment”. “The findings of [...] significant spillover effects”.
Zhu et al. (2024)	“Our results underscore [...] throughout the study period”. “Haikou is undergoing [...] strengthening their ecosystem services”. “Urban planning and [...] sustainable land use management”.
Theme 2	
Chi (2021)	“Despite the growing [...] from the legal perspective”. “Internationally, there lacks [...] regulate SEZs”. “This gap leaves [...] ‘sovereign management of globalization’”.
Huang (2021)	“CERI occurs within [...] consumer-oriented unilateralism”. “Chinese customs requires [...] for CERI imports”. “CERI platforms must [...] through joint liability”.
Theme 3	
Khaskheli and Zhao (2025)	“On 7 September [...] stimulate market entity vitality”. “Relevant competent departments [...] standardized rules”. “Penalties ranging from [...] cases of legal breaches”.
Theme 4	
Tian et al. (2021)	“Normalized responses, compared [...] maintaining social stability”. “Enhancing the government’s [...] legitimate foundation of rule”. “The combination of [...] can generate great power”.
Cui et al. (2020)	“Strong public opposition [...] closed before their scheduled closure dates”. “Anti-incinerator campaigns [...] major threats to social stability”. “The top-down, closed [...] authorities are being unfair”.

Note: GB — green buildings, HNFTP — Hainan Free Trade Port, CERI — cross-border e-commerce retail import.