

Public administration, context and innovation: A framework of analysis

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Abstract

Innovation in public administration (PA) has played a pivotal role in building good governance and has attracted significant attention in the academia. The literature on PA innovation is burgeoning; however, this article argues that there is 'a missing link' in the extant literature in that the impacts of variation in context on PA innovation have not been sufficiently investigated. This article elaborates the analytical perspectives on the influences of various contexts over PA innovation and the mechanisms through which impacts may take place. Both theoretical and methodological complexities and challenges are apparent in disentangling contextual influences from other factors. The article proposes a research agenda for a context-orientated comparative analysis of PA innovation and offers a brief illustration regarding contextual differences between China and the European Union in existing studies. The article calls for further studies in this direction.

KEYWORDS

China, comparative analysis, context, European Union, innovation, public administration

1 | INTRODUCTION

Innovation is a theme of central significance for public administration (PA) all over the world, as political, economic, social, environmental, legal and cultural factors constantly reshape the circumstances in which PA operates. PA is confronted with many new and complex challenges, which require creative thinking and innovative responses. The degree of change in the conditions of PA is, thus, often radical as is the pace of change, probably more rapid nowadays than it has been in most of the history of humankind. To adapt to a changing environment, and equally important to anticipate and pre-empt potentially impactful changes, public sector organisations are required to innovate. 'Embracing innovation' may sound a bit like a consultancy firm's slogan, but there are profound reasons why innovating, or building the capacities to innovate, is of central significance for the public sector to be up to its role and function in society and to the expectations of multiple publics. Understanding the mutual relations between innovation and PA, namely innovation *in* PA and the role of PA *in economic and social* innovation can therefore be claimed to be

an area of central significance for scholarly research and inquiry, and it is, or it should be, a priority for policymakers.

The innovation challenge is global: facing increasingly intricate social and economic problems, public sector organisations all over the world cannot just continue 'business as usual' but have to engage in forms of innovation. This, however, should not lead to embracing 'one-size-fits-all' approaches that overlook local differences. PA is embedded in distinctive and diverse 'contexts': the cultural, political, and administrative contexts shape PA, the ways in which it works and the ways in which it may be changed (Pollitt, 2013). This article thus argues for the significance of setting up a research agenda aimed at deepening our understanding of how contextual influences affect the dynamics of innovation within PA as well as for PA to be an enabler of economic and social innovation. The focus of this research agenda is therefore the triangular relationships among three elements: context, innovation and PA.

In this paper, we outline—or at least sketch—the contours of this research agenda. We commence by providing definitions of PA, innovation and context and proceed with elaborating on how

contextual influences may be understood as a key set of factors affecting the dynamics of PA innovation. We then outline how a comparative research agenda aimed at analysing or controlling for contextual influences on PA innovation could unfold, and tentatively develop a framework for understanding the contextual differences between China (a nation state) and countries in the European Union (EU) (a supranational–intergovernmental governance arrangement encompassing 27 countries), as an illustrative example. We conclude by urging scholars to undertake and contribute to this ambitious research agenda.

2 | DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

We use the term PA quite loosely to refer both to individual public sector organisations and to the broader public administrative system in a given polity. By individual public sector organisation, we mean organisations established in public law with a responsibility for one or more public services. We fully acknowledge that the third sector, commercial sector or ‘hybrid’ organisations—often operating in collaborative governance arrangements—have increasingly served as the centre stage in the delivery of public services. We refer collectively to all kinds of organisations involved in the delivery of public services as *public service organisations*, yet our analytical focus in this paper, for reasons of limiting and specifying the scope of application, is *public sector organisations*. We include both individual public sector organisations and the administrative system as a whole because this wide scoping enables to encompass in the analysis innovation occurring both at the ‘macro’ level of the public sector of a polity in its entirety (or in relevant segments of it) and at the ‘micro’ level of individual public sector organisations. It is also possible to identify a mesolevel (in-between) as well as a nanolevel (intraorganisation, e.g., a specific bureau) of innovation.

We define innovation as *a form of deliberate, or at least managed, socially purposeful change aimed at attaining something that otherwise would not be achieved, by leveraging on the possibility to do new and different things, to do the same things in new ways, or to enable a new meaning to be given to something*. This definition allows us to identify innovation in different domains and at different conceptual levels. Specifically, typologies of innovation may be delineated around the following notions: innovation in the output or ‘product’ (whether to be innovated is a public service, or a public policy/regulatory arrangement); innovation in the process (whether innovation occurs in the intra- or interorganisational processes of individual organisations or of broader governance arrangements); innovation of meaning (whether innovation concerns the attribution of meaning to something) and the orientation of innovation (whether it is in the internal working of an organisation or system/network of organisations or external in the interface of PA with the economy and society). We can also consider the level at which innovation occurs (whether it is micro or macro level). By way of illustrative examples, we argue that innovation may take one or more (often combined) of the following forms:

- Product innovation: such as delivering new public services or initiating new policies, with the former being at the microlevel and the latter at the macrolevel;
- Process innovation: such as a public management reform with the goal to deliver ‘more [of the same] with less’, which is an instance of innovation at the macrolevel;
- Innovation of meaning to accompany societal changes: such as public interventions that occur during the development of the Internet to articulate the social meaning of technological progress and to frame values and perceptions within which economic and societal actors operate by, for example, providing or withdrawing regulatory underpinning and social legitimacy to new products developed by tech companies.

In defining and scoping innovation, it is also central to identify the analytical frameworks through which the causes of innovation can be explained, or its effects can be gauged. For example, ‘digital government and innovation’ links PA innovation to digital technologies innovation; ‘innovation and risk’ explains the antecedents and consequences of innovation in terms of the governance of risk and explores how risk is allocated and managed across individuals and social groups in a society; ‘innovation and learning’ explains innovation in terms of learning process, knowledge management systems and skills development and so forth.

In our framing, which is necessarily very schematic, *the relationship of Innovation to PA* may be conceptualised as pertaining to four domains:

Domain 1 *Innovation at the level of the public sector in its entirety (or large portions of it), namely innovation as government-wide change of processes and routines (e.g., change in the public personnel policies of a country); it is mostly synonymous with public sector reform, of which public management or administrative reforms can be seen as components (for a classification, see Ongaro & Kickert, 2020).*

Domain 2 *Innovation at the microlevel, by which we mean something akin to the notion of strategic change at the level of individual public organisations and/or policy networks (e.g., Ferlie & Ongaro, 2015; Kickert et al., 1997; Pettigrew, 1987).*

Domain 3 *Innovation in the economy enabled or facilitated by PA (e.g., Mazzucato, 2013).*

Domain 4 *Innovation in society enabled or facilitated by PA (e.g., Voorberg et al., 2015).*

In this framing, Domains 1 and 2 may be categorised as *innovation within PA*, while Domains 3 and 4 pertain to *PA as enabler of innovation in the economy and society*. Generally, the public management literature or the broadly intended public governance literature addresses Domains 1 and 2, and, increasingly, Domain 4, while Domain 3 tends to be addressed by the literature closer to economics

(notably industrial economics and the economics of innovation where it focuses on the role of the public sector, e.g., Mazzucato, 2013). We argue that a research agenda on contextual influences on PA innovation could and should encompass all the four domains outlined above. Pursuing such a research agenda is obviously demanding, in terms of time and resources required.

Finally, context is a ubiquitous, crucial concept, yet challenging to define. Context has been aptly referred to as 'the missing link in public policy and management' in a collective work led by the late prominent scholar Christopher Pollitt, in a major attempt to define the notion for application to the field of public policy and public management writ large (Pollitt, 2013). To this purpose, it has been observed that '[P]ublic service organisations operate in many, and remarkably diverse, "houses". Shaped by the still nowadays very visible frontiers of the "old" nation states or by less visible borders drawn by history, geography, demography, affluence, culture, language, and religion, diverse "contexts" host and provide the frame in which public organisations act. The cultural, politico-institutional and administrative "context" in which public service organisations operate is a remarkably significant feature' (Ferlie & Ongaro, 2015, p. 121).

Context denotes 'an object of undetermined extension', as aptly noticed by Ruge (2013). Context matters because any understanding of organisational behaviour can never get rid of 'the broader fabric' in which action takes place. The word 'context' derives from the Latin *contextere*, 'to weave together'; indeed, at least under certain epistemological assumptions, context enables action, and human agency always takes place 'contextualised', weaved in a broader fabric (Clarke, 2013).

Following Pollitt (2013), we note that there is not just one context, but rather multiple and intersecting contexts. The context 'within' which an individual public sector organisation operates may be cultural, such as the 'Chinese culture' or the 'Western culture', or ideological, such as the NPM as a dominant or quasi-dominant ideology during the 1990s on how to run public sector organisations or other models of reform like (new) public governance or collaborative governance as rising influential ideologies nowadays. Context may be political, reflecting the main traits of politics in a country, or economic, as the state of an economy and its innovativeness is influential on the capacities to absorb and effect further innovation. Context may also be temporal; for example, a reform of public management never occurs at 'time equals zero', and rather it always takes place in the temporal context of other reforms, which have just been occurring or being on the way in the country.

Because of its multifaceted nature, context is analytically relative depending on the issue in question. A study of the differences between local governments in China in terms of fiscal austerity may find it useful to link such differences to regional economic and cultural dispositions. Contextual factors help explain why some anti-corruption innovations succeeded and others failed (Gong & Yang, 2020). National cultural traits may be analysed when comparing a Chinese province and a counterpart local or national government in one EU country regarding the same issue. Exemplifications as such may demonstrate one genuine difficulty in doing

comparative and especially cross-country studies: it is likely that the within-group variation is larger than the between-group variation, and the research methodology is thus required to reconcile contextual factors at different levels to isolate their influences (if such things is possible, as contextual influences may be conjunctural rather than operate in isolation—although analytically they may be distinguished). As contextual factors are nested in level and in kind, bringing these 'missing links' into the analysis encounters a challenge to obtain intellectual clarity and concision. Essentially, this brings to the fore the role of theorising and logical-deductive analysis to guide the research towards pointing out the core analytical dimensions, which pave the way for empirical investigation to be then conducted in later stages of the research design.

Some other distinctions are theoretically significant, and they are here briefly recalled. First, contexts are both factual and conceptual. Factual contexts refer to 'entities or dimensions of social reality: place (where?), time (when?), actors (who?) and substances (what?). The factual context is the context of PA, PA as part of social reality. [...] [The] Conceptual context of knowledge creation refers to interests, motivations, paradigmatic views and methodological preferences of the subject of knowledge, that is, the person researching or the author' (Virtanen, 2018, pp. 9–10). Second, scholars in the social sciences interpret context—more often as we have seen in the plural as contexts—as constitutive of action rather than just a mere backdrop: action simply 'is in context', or it is not (though the ontological implications of this statement require discussion, which is beyond what can be contained in this brief section). Third, any thorough understanding of context must encompass an analysis of the mechanisms and processes (i.e., causal chains) that, to use Pollitt's phrasing, 'animate' contexts and enable them to have 'effects' (Pollitt, 2013, p. 415). Indeed, the notion of causality varies. It may mean 'probabilistic causality' of the kind that is predicated as constituting the basic logic of inference of both quantitative and qualitative research designs in certain 'positivistic' strands of social science research (see King et al., 1994). It may also mean, in more 'traditional' approaches to causality, the search for 'necessary and sufficient conditions' of a phenomenon, or in other approaches, upholding multiple and conjunctural causation, namely multiple intersecting conditions linking features of context and process to certain outcomes. That is to say, it is a conjunction of factors leading to certain outcomes—and multiple conjunctions may lead to the same outcome, or equifinality, which serves as the main logic to resort to in contextual analysis (Abbott, 1992; Ragin, 1987). However, causality is defined and whatever the approaches to causality adopted by the investigator, they should be brought to the fore in theorising about contextual influences (see Ongaro, 2013).

3 | CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES AS EXPLANATORY FACTORS FOR PA INNOVATION

Why should context be put at the centre of the stage in the analytical framework to explain PA innovation? We deem that most of the

extant studies on public sector innovation, particularly in their search for the drivers of innovation, have paid attention to a wide range of factors, such as the role of leadership, learning, networking, accountability, in triggering, developing and sustaining innovation in PA over time (Hartley, 2005), but many of them have overlooked context—the political-administrative and cultural context of a polity—as enabler or hinderer of innovation. All too often, context is nearly excluded from the picture, or at best set in the background. This is not necessarily caused by incomprehension of the importance of context but may be due to the challenges of analysing contextual influences, both practical (the need for resources and time) and theoretical (how to conceptualise context).

The research agenda proposed in this article aims at bringing this ‘missing link’ (Pollitt, 2013), namely context, to the fore of the picture to empower our understanding of how context and contextual features affect PA innovation. In the perspective taken in this research agenda, innovation is ‘contextual’ and context is assumed as part and parcel of the explanatory framework. Context requires to be theorised at multiple levels and along diverse dimensions. Examples include, but are not limited to, the societal-religious culture of the country/region as a worldview (Ongaro, 2021), the ‘administrative tradition’ (Painter & Peters, 2010), the organisational culture (Pettigrew, 1979; which can also be seen as a malleable component on which deliberate organisational design can have an influence, Wynen et al., 2014), and the administrative model and reform narrative (e.g., Weberian bureaucracy, New Public Management, New Public Governance, Neo-Weberian State, New Public Service, Digital-era Governance) that prevail in the jurisdictions under examination. Context can be seen as the broader layers of factors with potential causal power, and as a broad range of potential enablers/hinderers that, combined with more microlevel factors (like those more commonly identified in the literature), may explain the dynamics of PA innovation. Broadening the explanatory framework to systematically consider context means enlarging the range of explanatory factors and explanatory narratives.

The shift of analytical focus to context has significant epistemological implications. It enlarges the very notion of causality from the deterministic or probabilistic causation, which is most common in the social sciences, to multiple conjunctural causation, whereby a configuration of factors jointly leads to a certain outcome. Multiple configurations can lead to the same outcome (collinearity), an approach which is commonly used in qualitative comparative analysis, a research method apt for identifying contextual influences through comparison (Ragin, 1987; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009; Thomann, 2019).

There are other epistemological considerations entailed in framing the notion of context. It may be queried whether context should be seen as a sort of ‘backdrop’, or rather as enabler of human agency (Clarke, 2013)—a question bearing huge implications in terms of drawing conceptually and theoretically from the field of the philosophy of mind. It may also be queried whether context can, for a number of purposes, be likened to culture (context as culture). This

perspective would lead research to draw extensively from such fields of the humanities as cultural anthropology (Hood, 1998) and to gauge the extent to which context is culturally constituted as a barrier, in the name of a presumed uniqueness of the country/culture/polity: the so-called ‘intransigent context’, in the most effective definition wrought out by Rugge (2013).

The role of contextual influences in PA innovation is tentatively summarised in Figure 1, in a most simplified way. This diagram, as simple as it is, embodies some complex relations. First, context is manifested through different forms, at different levels, and in different dimensions. A good understanding of context is contingent on the kind of PA innovation in question. Second, context influences not only PA innovations themselves directly, but also other factors which are identified by the literature as having influences on PA innovations. There is, therefore, a methodological caution here about how to measure and distinguish the direct influences of contextual factors on PA innovation and the indirect influences mediated by other influencing factors of PA innovation. Third, for both direct and indirect contextual influences there is a need to discern whether to treat contexts as a ‘backdrop’ or as enabling agency. This may determine if and how contextual factors may enter into formal and empirical analysis like hierarchical regression models, where factors can be conceptualised and treated as variables, or whether other research methods are required like event- and social-mechanism-oriented research; this may often ultimately result in the adoption of a plurality of research methods, ideally in combination, although it may be made difficult by the diverse underlying logics and epistemologies of the different methods. In fact, in contextual analyses it is possible to detect both variable-orientated conceptual frameworks and episodes/events-orientated conceptual frameworks. The latter look for causality often through the analysis of social mechanisms of other frameworks, rather than searching for (causation as) correlation (Capano et al., 2019; Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1998; Ongaro, 2019; Ongaro & Longo, 2020). Fourth, the directions of influences may be inverted: contexts, macro and stable as they are in comparison to influencing factors and PA innovations, are also influenced by the latter; such endogeneity brings caution to the design of causal analysis. Last but not least, for cross-context studies, a genuine difficulty is to identify and describe or, where applicable, measure the three components of Figure 1 in a (at least subjectively) consistent and agreed-upon ways, which is only the first step toward meaningful comparative studies.

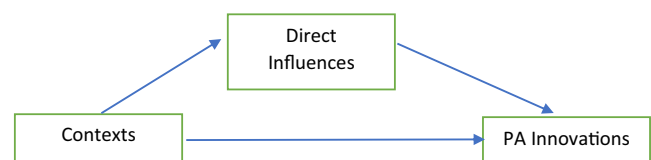


FIGURE 1 Influences of context on PA innovation [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

4 | TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA

In order to frame a comparative research agenda, certain key building blocks may be useful. The first one is the issue of what theoretical-empirical framing can enable to 'make sense' of the diverse contexts being considered. Manifold answers may be provided. As we have seen, context requires to be theorised at multiple levels and along diverse dimensions, from the societal-religious culture and the basic features of the administrative system of the given jurisdiction, to the organisational culture (if the analysis of innovation is focused on the organisation level). The study of context should also overcome the limits of a static analysis by, for example, considering dominant reform narratives and concatenations of reforms at different points in time. A useful starting point for designing a comparative research to investigate how context may be influential over PA innovation is, we suggest, to adopt the framework by Painter and Peters (2010), and identify a number of administrative traditions worldwide. Administrative traditions are defined by the relative similarities/dissimilarities between administrative systems in the world, based on four basic dimensions, including the state-society relationship, the relative significance of law versus management in defining the basic tasks of administration, the relationship between politicians and civil servants, and the extent to which there is a bureaucratic career distinct from private/commercial sector careers. By deploying this framework, Painter and Peters (2010) identify nine major administrative traditions worldwide. We contend that comparisons may fruitfully occur between two or more traditions, in order to accommodate a certain degree of dissimilarities along the main dimensions, which in turn may facilitate the identification of contextual factors affecting the dynamics of PA innovation. For example, comparisons may be made between the European and Chinese contexts, which belong to different administrative traditions, though it should be noticed that Painter and Peters identify as many as five different traditions across the continent of Europe, while they consider one 'Confucian' tradition to encompass China and a number of other countries in East Asia. Research designs may also consider binary comparisons between China and specific groups of European countries belonging to the same administrative tradition, though the influence of EU governance on each group of countries in the EU should be accounted for.

In their analysis of the applicability of multilevel governance (MLG), an approach originated from the scholarly study of the EU, to China, Ongaro et al. (2019) argue that the MLG framework, widely adapted through some concept-stretching, may nonetheless be applicable to some profiles of China. The theoretical lens of MLG helps understand and reinterpret certain features of the Chinese context. Notably, these contextual features include China's increasing interconnectedness at the international level wielding an influence on Chinese public policies, similar in some respects to the function performed by the European level of governance on its member states' public policies, its domestic decentralisation and intergovernmental cooperation, as well as intensified collaboration

across the state-society divide in service and governance issues. Nonetheless, there are also fundamentally different contextual traits such as the profoundly diverse political systems, the different dynamics of 'hierarchical' central-local relations in China versus the 'reciprocal-influence' member state-union relations, and the nature of state-market relations. Whilst the applicability of MLG can be justified (Jing & Li, 2019), its explanatory power may have to be discounted.

Table 1 is a summary of some recent comparative studies on PA and policy between the EU and China. It shows the awareness and efforts by scholars to take into consideration the influence of contextual factors when comparing China and the EU (or some of its member states) in areas such as social policy, the civil service, environmental policy and public health. Among the identified contextual factors in these studies, political structure, administrative capacity, financial competence, technological development, cultural tradition, and state-society relations are frequently noticed and recognized. Of course, the geographical location and size or the level of economic development, *inter alia*, are also regularly discussed as important contextual elements. Interestingly, despite the vast political, economic and cultural differences between China and the EU, some studies find unexpected commonalities on a number of issues between the two sides (e.g., Jing et al., 2021; Moro et al., 2019; Van der Wal & Yang, 2015). These studies contribute to comparative PA and policy, although it remains challenging to figure out if these commonalities are created by similar internal dynamics or forged by mutual learning and adaptation, or both.

The second main issue concerns what range of *research questions* characterise this research agenda. To this purpose, we outline and categorise possible research questions by grouping them into an indicative, initial and incomplete, yet hopefully useful set of interconnected issues for research. They can be framed as belonging to five main categories: 'overarching' research questions, which can be boiled down to the one on how context affects PA innovation; defining questions about the core concepts of PA, context, and innovation; the mapping/framing questions, which are concerned with delineating the spatial-historical contours of the areas object of comparative analysis; 'core' empirical and theoretical questions, which identify and explain the relationships between PA innovations and their contexts; and relevance-related questions concerning the ultimate 'added value' of the research agenda and querying whether ultimately bringing contextual influences into the picture contributes to advancing knowledge in the field of PA innovation. The five sets of questions are delineated as follows:

- *Overarching research questions*: How does context affect PA innovation? A set of derived, first-order research questions may be engendered from it.
- *Defining questions*: What is context? What is innovation? How should they be defined? What is PA? How can we understand the difference between 'policy innovation' and 'innovation policy'? This set of questions is in a sense preliminary; it is acknowledged that univocal answers cannot be expected for research questions so

TABLE 1 Contextual influences identified in EU–China comparative studies

Issues/innovations	Contexts	Identified contextual factors	Examples
Social pension unification	China and EU	Political determination, administrative capacity and financial management ability	Li (2014)
Civil servant values	China and The Netherlands	Administrative traditions	Van der Wal and Yang (2015)
Electromobility	France, Germany, China and India	Technological capabilities, demand conditions, political priorities and economic governance.	Altenburg et al. (2016)
Carbon emissions trading	China and EU	Ambiguity in the legal status of relevant policies and regulations, etc.	Tang et al. (2018)
Water management	China and EU	National innovative capacity	Moro et al. (2019)
Climate policy implementation	EU, China and US	Comparative strength of civil society and party-state	Hewitt et al. (2020)
COVID-19 responses	Sweden, China, France and Japan	Institutional arrangements and cultural orientation	Yan et al. (2020)
Contracting in elderly care	China and The Netherlands	State intervention, public sector reforms, civil society development, social regulation and support scheme	Jing et al. (2021)

Abbreviation: EU, European Union.

vast in remit and ambitious, hence we argue in a pragmatic way, with an epistemology rooted in conventionalism (see Ongaro, 2020, chapters 3 and 6), that a research agenda can grow even accepting partly differing answers to such questions, provided these differences are made explicit by the authors of individual research projects and are taken into account when consolidating the findings.

- *Mapping/framing questions:* What are the main features of ‘context’ pertinent to explaining the dynamics of PA innovation being discussed? For example, what characteristics of Europe, China, Eastern Asia, Southeastern Asia and so forth, are helpful for a better understanding of PA innovations at the national level? How would the regional dispositions of a locality shape its capacity for PA innovation? Although these questions are mostly descriptive in nature, they set boundaries for ensuing analyses and substantiate context in a less abstract-conceptual and a more specific and relevant way.
- *Empirical-theoretical questions:* What explains innovation in PA in one or more of the four domains under conditions of a certain context [X, Y, Z]? These are the core explanatory questions of the research agenda, and they reveal how PA innovations are embedded in, if not determined by, specific contexts.
- *Relevance-related questions:* Does ‘bringing context into the picture’ contribute to explaining innovation? Or conversely, does it blur the picture by adding an unnecessary layer and hence falls to the Ockham’s razor critique (Ongaro, 2020, chapter 2)? This final set of questions concerns the reflective critique of the perspective adopted in this paper to bring context to the fore. If findings were achieved irrespective of contextual considerations, then the latter should be dropped. We are very doubtful that this is the case, yet we are open to consider this fundamental critique to the approach we have proposed.

5 | LESSONS FROM ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Besides this framework article, there are three more articles selected into this special issue. These three articles all dwell on issues and profiles of innovation in China and are illustrative of some of the shaping effects of Chinese contextual factors.

The article by Scott (2021) introduces innovations in Hong Kong’s civil service, which is situated in a traditional PA context characterised by a hierarchical bureaucratic culture (a UK model of administration rather than a Chinese one due to Hong Kong’s colonial history). Through a historical review of innovations in the Hong Kong bureaucracy, the author argues that political commitment and agency have pushed forward innovations without introducing fundamental structural changes of the government. The author postulates that circumventing structural barriers or working through political channels to reduce their impact may be a more constructive strategy than creating dedicated agencies to develop innovative measures. Nonetheless, he argues that although barriers may be worked around or temporarily suspended, internal public sector innovation through structural reform and the development of more flexible organisational processes within traditional bureaucracies is the critical starting point for ultimately successful sustained innovation. His study indicates the interesting albeit complex interactions between organisational and political contexts in shaping innovation adoption by the bureaucracy.

The article by Ye et al. (2021) discusses urban renewal policies and innovations in China and the transformation of policy rationales and goals in this area. Using Yongqing Fang in Guangzhou as a case, they argue that there has been a shift in urban policy from an economy-oriented perspective to an emphasis on sustainability and inclusiveness. The article explains the shift by observing changing

urban contexts in which new players gradually entered the policy arena and had their values and voices reflected in policy making and implementation. To do that, the article divides the evolution of institutional context of urban renewal history into four stages: underrepresentation phase (2006–2009), consultation phase (2010–2011), grassroots action phase (2011–2016), and integrated renewal phase (2016 to present). The authors identify the impacts of the structural-instrumental, cultural-institutional, and environmental perspectives on policy innovations in the urban field.

The article by Zhang and Wang (2021) studies the diffusion of River Chief Innovation (RCI) as an innovation in environmental protection in China. Using qualitative comparative analysis, the authors find that local tournament, local learning, and their conjunctures shape the adoption of RCI. The article demonstrates how the contextual factors, especially the vertical and horizontal intergovernmental relations, have shaped the functioning of policy diffusion mechanisms such as coercion, competition, learning and emulation, as well as their interactions, in ways different to the Western contexts.

Together, the three empirical articles included in this special issue show in multiple ways the influences of contextual factors on PA innovation. First, they indicate the variation of local contexts in China despite its unitary government system. Even if it may be correctly argued that both Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland have hierarchical bureaucratic systems, they are different in their hierarchical cultures. And the evolution of urban renewal contexts can also be different for different cities in China. Hence, they remind us of the caution demanded of scholars and policymakers alike when moving across contexts featuring subtle differences. Second, they show that the impact of contexts is often indirect but lasts long. In the Hong Kong case, external innovation may bypass the impeding organisational context temporarily, yet sustainable effects still depend on transformed organisational culture and capacities. In the RCI case, the strengthened central leadership still leaves space for local spontaneous learning, yet top-down recognition could activate the interlocal competition and extend the diffusion continuum to the tournament side. Third, these articles indicate that contexts themselves may evolve at different speed and magnitude. This has been clear in the Hong Kong case as well as the Yongqing Fang case. Methodologically, combing both the longitudinal and horizontal variations of contexts may provide stronger explanatory powers. Last but not least, these articles show consistent contextual influences on innovation across different issues and policy areas.

6 | CONCLUSION

Overall, this special issue aims to provide a useful starting point to unveil the complexity of contextual influences on PA innovation, by outlining a general framework and providing empirical evidence. Specifically, this article outlines a research agenda for advancing our understanding of how context and contextual influences affect the dynamics, processes, and outcomes of PA innovation. We start by defining PA innovation as encompassing both innovation within PA

and economic and social innovation enabled by public policy and PA. On this basis, we further classify PA innovation into four different domains: PA innovations at the macrolevel, PA innovations at the microlevel, PA-enabled economic innovations, and PA-enabled social innovations. Having discussed key concepts about PA, innovation and context, our research agenda then proposes five sets of research questions dealing with overarching, conceptual, framing/mapping, theoretical/empirical and relevance-related issues, respectively. We have used case studies of China and hinted to a comparison with a profoundly diverse context like the EU as illustrations of how this research agenda might be pursued, in these or other regions of the world.

The proposed research agenda fills a gap in the academic literature concerning innovation in PA by bringing the issue of contextual influences on innovation to the forefront. We hope that scholars from different regions of the world will be willing to engage in this research agenda and collaborate to enable a deeper knowledge of how context and contextual influences affect PA innovation, and hence of the dynamics of innovation within PA and enabled by PA—which is a theme of central significance for both the research and the practice of PA.

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