

## **Introduction to the Special Issue: Multi-Level Governance in China**

# **Towards multi-level governance (MLG) in China? Coping with complex public affairs across jurisdictions and organizations**

### *Abstract*

This special issue argues for the applicability of the conceptual framework of Multi-Level Governance (MLG) to the political-administrative regime of China, provided significant adaptations and qualifications are developed. The application of MLG to China enables to account for global influences as well as for the involvement of non-governmental actors in public policy-making. More radically, we suggest in this introductory article the development of MLG may be interpreted as a way of enhancing the societal legitimacy of the political regime under the conditions of new authoritarianism. We conclude this article by drawing a fascinating yet possibly hazardous and overstretched parallel; that is, the development of MLG may be part and parcel of a process of building political legitimacy in China, just as it may be a way of exploring paths for the renewal of beleaguered traditional liberal democracy in Europe. Albeit along profoundly different trajectories, China and Europe might adopt MLG arrangements for a very purposive course of action: enhancing the legitimacy of the respective and very diverse political systems and buttressing their very foundations. This suggests a strongly normative and purposive application of MLG.

## **Multi-Level Governance in China?**

Marketization, globalization, and social restructuring have fundamentally changed the governance of public affairs in China, adjusting its values, structures, processes, and instruments to deal with unprecedented challenges. Notably, common problems, demands, and interests have induced collaborative actions across multiple levels of government and engaged various stakeholders, such as intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), private firms, non-government organizations (NGOs), and citizens. International and global influences over the converging processes are also evident. Borrowing from a literature which was originally developed in Europe, we term this phenomenon as multi-level governance (MLG) (Marks, 1993; Enderlein, Walti, & Zurn, 2010; Ongaro, 2015). MLG arrangements, new as they may be to China, can be detected, and at times are deliberately pursued with enthusiasm, in areas such as crime control, elderly service delivery, technological innovation, trade and investment facilitation, domestic and international migration, corruption prevention, disaster relief, and water and natural environment preservation (Jing, Brown and Gong, 2012). The development of MLG has been reshaping the traditional view of public policy and administration in China that relies solely on mechanisms of hierarchy, publicness, and sovereignty.

A study of MLG in China responds to both universal and contextual curiosities. Featuring traits of intergovernmental relations and collaborative governance (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Jing et al., 2012; Jing, 2015), MLG is a rich concept involving many theoretically significant issues. What is MLG? Who are the players and what are their

interactive patterns? How are problems identified, agendas set, and decisions made, implemented and evaluated in MLG arrangements? How do learning processes take place and how are risks controlled and benefits shared under an MLG frame? What are the applied and to-be-developed techniques and instruments of MLG? How does the development of MLG affect the relations between the state, society, and market? How have domestic and external factors intervened to shape engaged actors and final results? How can the performance of an MLG system be measured? An examination of the development of MLG in China helps address some of these questions in the specific context of China and may also bring about novel research perspectives and new questions of more universalistic interest.

China became the world's second largest national economy in 2010, and its ratio of external economic dependence (international trade of goods divided by GDP) was 33.6% in 2017. Being the most populous country and one of the fastest growing economies in the world, it nevertheless faces serious challenges such as ageing, polarization, gender imbalance, uneven economic development, corruption, and pollution. The intergovernmental system in China has been responding to these and other challenges by being flatter and more cooperative. Meanwhile, there has been increasing collaboration with external actors whose relations with governments range from significant affiliation to full autonomy (Liu, Zhao, and Wang, 2010; Jing, 2012). China's road toward MLG arouses stimulating questions due to its sheer size and internal diversities, a transitional economy, entrenched governing culture and practices, the

established path/psychology of specific issues, and a capacity deficit of the external actors (Jing, 2015). A special issue on China from the MLG perspective is, thus, both theoretically and practically important, as it may shed new light on public policy and administration theories and provide important governance implications for China and the world.

### **Definitions and the theoretical status of MLG**

What is MLG? Marks (1993: 392) provides a minimalist definition that MGL is “a system of continuous negotiations among nested governments at several territorial tiers.” Adding the role of non-state actors, Ongaro opens the 2015 volume on *Multi-Level Governance: The Missing Linkages* by recalling in the introductory chapter the definition of MLG as “the simultaneous activation of governmental and non-governmental actors at various jurisdictional levels” (Piattoni, 2010b:159).

Theoretical perspectives derived from the MLG theory have been applied to a wide set of issues spanning from political mobilization (politics), policy-making (policy), to state restructuring (polity). Thus, it is reasonable to assume MLG as a theory, rather than just a descriptor, or at least as a frame from which theoretical explanations may be drawn, in combination with other theories.

Piattoni (2015:326) provides a detailed description of the notion of MLG which emphasises its distinctive traits:

[T]he still relatively novel concept of MLG is truly worthwhile, I believe, only if we take seriously two components of this term: *multi-level governance*. The ‘multi’ prefix would not be justified if the levels were authentically only two, hence the need to investigate also subnational dynamics. The ‘nance’ suffix would not be justified if we were to talk only about governmental actors, where by ‘governmental’ I mean administrative or political actors *legitimized to decide and implement policies by some direct or indirect act of representative delegation* [emphasis in original]. This suffix is justified, then, only insofar as it points to either the involvement of non-governmental actors in authoritative decision-making (in contrast to their involvement in the mere implementation and assessment of decisions) or to the novel ways in which governmental and non-governmental actors interact in the decision, implementation and assessment of public policies.

Following Piattoni, we notice an interest in the scholarly community in “overstretching” the notion of MLG, –despite Sartori’s always valid admonition about concept stretching in the social sciences (1970) – so that it may serve as a supple and adaptable umbrella notion to facilitate the dialogue amongst epistemic communities. This has been especially the case in the cradle of MLG, that is, Europe, where MLG has to some extent become synonymous with its distinctive governance configuration (see Ongaro and van Thiel, 2017, chapter 1). The main thrust of MLG arises from two areas which have increasingly received scholarly attention: getting beyond international relations as a lens to read what was happening in Europe where European Union (EU) issues were treated increasingly as domestic policies in member states more than “international relations”; and getting beyond EU integration theories in order to move on from explaining what drove the process of integration in

the first instance to understand how the EU works, once established.

There may be a third thrust of MLG studies, that is, to go beyond the ‘traditional’ and more US-centered Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) studies, which are deemed not so apt to capture the distinctiveness of governance across national frontiers (see Ongaro *et al.*, 2010 and 2011, for a systematic comparison between “European” MLG and “American” IGR studies). In its definition, MLG entails that more than two levels of government are influential on policy-making, and it places an emphasis on getting beyond mere governmental actions to move towards a governance approach, which is very much attuned with the contemporaneous “governance turn” of the 1990s in the West.

More recently there has been a shift from explaining why MLG came about in the EU to explaining why MLG has emerged not just in Europe but also elsewhere, as seen in the research agenda set out by Hooghe and Marks (2001). Piattoni (2015) suggests a number of high level narratives that interpret the broad causes for MLG arrangements to come into existence. These include a “regional awakening” narrative (from the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s), coupled with a globalization narrative (1990s), and a transnational society mobilization narrative. In addition, there is the very “regional integration narrative” of the EU which in turn has been inspirational for other regions of the world (indeed more in past than in present times) to attempt to enhance regional coordination of economic policies if not outright integration, such as

Mercosur/Mercosul in Latin America, ASEAN in South-East Asia, the African Union and its predecessor, and others.

However, this does not countenance avoiding tough defining challenges, aware that the more the connotational field of this concept is enriched, the less encompassing its denotational clout will become (Sartori 1984). Schmitter (2004: 49) has developed a narrower and stringent definition by referring MLG as “an arrangement for making binding decisions that engages a multiplicity of politically independent but otherwise interdependent actors – private and public – at different levels of territorial aggregation in more or less continuous processes of negotiation/ deliberation/ implementation, and that does not assign exclusive policy competence or assert a stable hierarchy of political authority to any of these levels.” This notion makes the concept of MLG amenable to drawing precise boundaries of what is and what is not within its remit. It may thus pave the way for explanatory and normative, rather than more broadly descriptive, usages of the term.

However, the trade-off between a broader and a narrower definition of MLG becomes clear when extending the concept to diverse polity and political systems beyond its North-Western European cradle and beyond EU studies. Challenges facing the stringent definition when applied to China include, for example, whether it makes sense to assume the levels of government to be “independent” of each other, whether all players are equal, and what the roles of non-state actors in China's MLG are. These

should not affect the explanatory bearing of MLG to the context of China, however.

As a matter of fact, the majority of the countries in the world have a unitary system of government and it will be uncommon that actors in the public arena are politically independent of each other. Further, in most parts of the world, social actors are still not comparable to governments in their power and capacity, and their engagement in public affairs is rather limited. In these places, the role of non-state actors in MLG may not be similar to that of their counterparts in (especially) North-Western Europe.

A normative purpose of MLG under this context is precisely to help these actors develop their capabilities and to provide room for their interactive involvement in governance. We believe it is more appropriate to follow Piattoni (2015:326-327)'s definition that MLG is "a class of policymaking arrangements characterized by the simultaneous activation of governmental and non-governmental actors at different jurisdictional levels and such that the interrelationships thus created defy existing hierarchies and rather take the form of non-hierarchical networks." We agree with Piattoni (2015) that although MLG arrangements challenge the ideal-typical notion of Westphalian state, their ultimate impact is determined by the mobilization capacity of all actors involved.

It should also be noted that the notion of governance has various meanings and it is worth dwelling on them in distinguishing MLG from other similar concepts. Networked governance (NG) is one of them. The notion of NG deals with loosely structured, horizontal relationships that have developed over time. Cooperation within networks is

usually based on informal agreements among interdependent actors who trust each other (Fenwick, Van Uytsel & Wrbka, 2014). Network is, thus, usually characterized by coordination between informal social systems rather than by bureaucratic structures (Jones, Hesterly & Borgatti, 1997). MLG can certainly take a form of networked actors with mutual resource dependence, yet MLG and NG have some easily observable differences. NG tends to be composed of actors with common interests, who get connected through informal yet routinized ties to focus on local issues and who are usually more active in policy implementation, rather than in policy making. MLG, on the other hand, goes beyond networks to engage various actors at different levels and across different jurisdictions in both decision making and implementation. The mechanisms of MLG may be either informal or formal, routinized or ad hoc, and voluntary or imposed.

MLG also differs from collaborative governance (CG). As suggested by Ansell and Gash (2007: 544), CG is a strategy of governing, through which “one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.” Their key notion is that CG enables participants to get directly involved in decision making instead of being just “consulted” (Ansell and Gash, 2007). CG is usually taken as a kind of formal and structured arrangement of governance. Walter and Petr (2000: 495) consider CG as a formal activity that “involves joint activities, joint structures and

shared resources.” An important difference between MLG and CG is that, while both have collaboration as an integral component, CG usually does not touch issues that involve a complex structure of governmental entities from more than two hierarchical levels, as it often looks at a single government or a few governmental agencies at the same level. It appears that, if not theoretically, at least in most of its empirical applications CG lacks the intergovernmental elements and ensuing complexities of MLG. In an attempt to expand the remit of CG to be treated as a generic policy instrument, Ansell and Gash (2017) work out a conceptualization of the notion of collaborative platforms as a basis for the development of CG and discuss a wide array of instances of CG in action. Though many are “international”, at least in the sense of involving some international governmental or non-governmental actors in the locality where policy outcomes attainable through enacting collaborative advantage are sought, virtually none of the cases examined have the supranational dimension at its core, nor is the emphasis on intergovernmental relations. MLG, on the other hand, deals with multiple actors and issues in more complex structures of policy making and implementation that often encompass supranational actors. What we argue here is not about drawing a sharp divide between CG or NG, on one hand, and MLG, on the other hand – as they are frameworks conceptually and empirically at least partly porous. Rather, we emphasize that neither NG (with its emphasis on networks as the unit of analysis) nor CG (with its emphasis on attaining the collaborative advantage as the unit of analysis) should be employed as an alternative to MLG (with its emphasis on the multi-level nature of complex governance systems as the main unit of

analysis).), rather CG and NG complement, but do not replace, MLG. Ultimately what we argue here is that the three (composite) frameworks – CG, NG, MLG – are important concepts to be used in a complementary fashion to shed light on different facets of the same complex phenomena.

In short, MLG provides a new angle whose analytical strength is only partially covered by existing concepts and can be further explored through comparative analyses encompassing diverse contexts. MLG, by having a supranational level, incurs issues related to sovereignty and regional cooperation that are usually absent in public policy and administration studies. It assumes a complex structure of governments, which may (or may not) have a hierarchy among them although their relations are not necessarily governed by such a hierarchy. Cross-sector collaboration, a basic component of MLG, plays a role in facilitating or shaping the collaboration between multiple layers and jurisdictions of government. Consequently, legitimacy is always a strong and sometimes even dominant concern in MLG's functioning. MLG has to strive for institutional appropriateness as it involves multiple actors, deals with multifaceted issues, and operates in complicated institutional environments.

### **Applying MLG to China**

Given its Western origin, what is the significance of applying an MLG lens to the study of public governance in China? Indeed, there have been concerns about the applicability of the MLG, a concept associated with democratic pluralism rather than

with authoritarianism, to the Chinese context (see Hensengerth and Lu, in this issue).

We would argue, however, that it is both appropriate and feasible to adopt an MLG approach to governance studies in China where collaboration, whether intergovernmental or cross-jurisdictional, vertical or horizontal, formal or informal, has become a major trend in dealing with various governance issues.

At the international level, China has become increasingly integrated with the rest of the world as a major player in global and regional affairs. Since it opened up itself to the outside world in 1978, China has made spectacular achievements in economic growth, social transformation, and international integration, often on its own terms. China is now the world's second largest economy and has actively participated in regional and global cooperation such as the ASEAN plus 3 scheme and the signing of the Paris Agreement. It has assertively tried to shape the global governance agenda by promoting, for example, the One Belt One Road Initiative and the concept of "a community of shared future for mankind." While being a major trade partner with more than two thirds of the countries in the world, China has also worked to strengthen its soft power by expanding cultural exchanges and social interactions. This is a two-way process, as China's globalization also makes global rules, values, and expectations a natural source of influence over its domestic governance.

At the national level, China's post-1978 reform has demonstrated a clear trend of decentralization, notably in the economic and administrative spheres. As a result, the

China's multi-level governmental system has acquired novel and additional characteristics of collaboration. There are five formal levels of government in China, (central, province, municipality, county, and township), the coordination of which has long been challenging. Market-preserving federalism has been proposed to describe the collaborative central-local division of economic functions (Montinola, Qian and Weingast, 1995). Horizontal cooperation among mutually independent jurisdictions has also developed rapidly (Chen, Ma, and Suo, 2015). The role of the central government in many areas of local economic cooperation is rather limited.

At the subnational level, fast-growing cross-sector collaboration in public affairs has also taken place. Decades-long marketization has created formidable economic forces that are not as directly controlled by the government as they used to be. Private enterprises have been active in providing economic infrastructure and public services under collaborative arrangements with governments. The development of social organizations has accelerated as a result of reduced state control. Various collaborative models of social service delivery have been tried and widely adopted in urban China. Although collaboration is not always on an equal basis and power sharing is often informal and limited, social organizations sometimes play a critically important role in policy areas such as environmental protection.

The rapid development of vertical and horizontal collaboration makes China an ideal case for studying the explanatory power of MLG beyond its original application.

How, then, can we apply MLG to the Chinese context? Hensengerth (2015) offers some precious entry points. He brings the notion of scaling into the discussion of MLG's applicability to the cultural-political context of China and argues that in order for MLG to have utility in other cultural contexts, "it needs to move away from a consideration of pre-given scales as locus of authority and consider indigenous governance concepts and notions of scale, and it crucially needs to map power relationships in the making and implementation of policies in order to reach analytical depth" (p.296). Here, scales refer to nested geographical hierarchies (global, regional, national, and local) and especially relationships where political authorities and geographical units do not coincide or where vertical and horizontal relationships of authority are in conflict (Hensengerth, 2015; Bulkeley, 2005; Delaney and Leitner, 1997) The notion of scales is applicable to authoritarian regimes where decision making involves multiple levels but does not necessarily follow a strictly top-down process. As Hensengerth (2015: 296) suggests, "autocracies can be highly fragmented and subject to complex decision-making processes that can arise during processes of administrative reform. This can lead to vibrant and reflexive systems of governance that exhibit adaptive skills necessary to ensure regime survival amidst a continuously diversifying society and changing external circumstances."

Following this argument, applying the notion of MLG to China entails adopting a process of state scaling and rescaling. As a result of economic and administrative reforms, the state power has been scaled up or down along vertical and horizontal lines

in China (Li and Wu 2012; Luo et al. 2014). The territorial and horizontal shifts of authority are interlinked because the state has to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness in delivering its policies (Büchs 2009). State power scaling is similar to vertical and horizontal power diffusion, but it is a more flexible tool as it recognizes the need for formally and informally reorganizing the space and motivation of diffusion. It gives greater flexibility and explanatory power to the role of levels in policy processes by going beyond the pre-given levels of the state power (Hensengerth, 2015)

An implication of the argument of scaling is that MLG has to be adapted in a supple way to the Chinese context. Also to complement the argument, there is another sense in which scaling may be applied; that is, the global level and international policy regime (e.g., the Paris Agreement in the field of the environmental policy) may to some extent represent the functional equivalent to the upper and “independent” level of governance required by the more stringent definition of MLG (Piattoni, 2010 and 2015). While obviously there is no “supranational” level of government in China, international policy regimes may take a domestic dimension. This can be seen, for example, when international environment regimes are coupled with concerns about deteriorating environmental conditions by the Chinese governmental authorities. They may even constitute a sort of independent upper level over national governments, in the sense that they are not easily influenced by national or local authorities in MLG arrangements. For these reasons, MLG arrangements can be detected in certain policy areas but not in others in China.

### **Facets of MLG in China: An overview of this special issue**

How can the concept of MLG, which originated in Europe, be understood in the Chinese context? Does it offer any new insights or provide explanatory power for a better understanding of China's ongoing reforms of public governance and rapid social changes? What can the case of China add to the existing literature on MLG? The three articles in this special issue attempt to address these questions from different angles and based on diverse yet rich empirical bases. They use sector-specific cases or data to analyze the development of MLG in China, highlighting its trajectories, characteristics and implications.

The three articles deal with different levels of governance ranging from public participation, the role of the private sector, to the involvement of global players in the governance of public affairs, reflecting the key themes of MLG studies. Despite their specific foci and different perspectives, these articles point to a clear trend towards MLG in China in certain policy sectors and, notably, demonstrate the importance of using MLG as a lens to make sense of dramatic changes in China's governance reform over the recent decades.

Starting from the viewpoint that public participation is an empirical rather than a normative phenomenon in China, Hensengerth and Lu examine how environmental protests, while aiming to improve government accountability, may contribute to local institution-building and allow an MLG model of governance to develop under China's

authoritarian system. Based on in-depth analysis of three cases, they argue that the environmental protests, which occurred because of citizens' demand for implementing public participation laws and policies, improved the effectiveness of environmental governance. More specifically, these protests resulted in significant concessions from the government and led to the creation of local institutions for more public participation. The protesters successfully negotiated space for government-citizen interactions and for the formation of accountability mechanisms in environmental decision processes. The opening up of the environmental policy making to non-state actors empowers private citizens and facilitates their engagement in public governance from the societal level, thus contributing to the development of MLG in China. In sum, the article by Hensengerth and Lu focuses on the interaction between the state and private citizens in enhancing environmental governance.

Jing and Li's piece examines how interactions between the state and non-state actors may in turn strengthen intergovernmental relations within the state itself. They contend that the extant literature on collaborative governance has not paid enough attention to the fact that the involvement of non-state actors in public governance may smooth the relationships between governments at different levels. Using the development of an "Internet +" national strategy in China as a case, Jing and Li illustrate how this has happened and under what conditions. For a long time, the Chinese bureaucracy was bogged down with rigid demarcation of powers, asymmetric information, poor communication and ineffective coordination across functional and

jurisdictional lines. This led to fragmented policy making and implementation, with government agencies driven by parochial interests. The involvement of private firms in the formation of the “Internet +” national strategy has helped break down collaboration barriers not just between public and private sectors but also between the central and local governments. Jing and Li find that private firms demonstrate mediating, brokering, leveraging, and coordinating functions in facilitating intergovernmental relationships and in pressing for concerted and consistent policy responses from governments. They constitute an indispensable part in the policy process of the “Internet +” national strategy. Jing and Li’s study also indicates that MLG does not necessarily imply or require equal relationships between the state and non-state actors; MLG nevertheless brings about greater openness, more diffused power distribution, and wider public participation than otherwise in social service delivery.

The article by Yitian Huang examines how the behavior of Chinese exporting industries has been shaped under the MLG arrangements and explores the driving forces behind their preference for a “climate-related” strategy over a “climate-focused” one. Huang distinguishes two different kinds of “climate-friendly” activities. The “climate-related” type does not directly aim at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but seeks auxiliary benefits of climate change mitigation for environmental protection. The “climate-focused” type, on the other hand, is dedicated to reducing emissions, while trying to generate other benefits such as energy saving at the same time. Huang’s analysis reveals

that Chinese exporting firms are more inclined to adopt the former than the latter under a MLG system that is characterized by the convergence of state-centered climate politics and market-oriented climate governance. Their attitudes and behaviors are influenced by various actors of the MLG network who hold different perspectives. Generally speaking, international norms, MNEs and NGOs push the Chinese exporting firms towards “climate-focused” actions, while the domestic pro-growth policy environment encourages Chinese exporters to engage in “climate-related” business activities. As a consequence, although it is desirable to have globally-concerted efforts to address climate change, controversies about the goal, strategy and assessment of climate-friendly strategies do occur in multi-level climate governance. The behavior of Chinese exporting firms is shaped by global interactions and domestic concerns, by political and market forces, and by public and private players. Huang’s article, thus, highlights the interplay of various forces that characterizes the dynamics of MLG.

### **MLG, Democracy, New Authoritarianism and the Chinese case**

The application of the MLG notion, which was developed in Europe and notably as a conceptual tool to better understand the nature of the EU, to different cultural and political settings brings about some theoretical issues. Studies of MLG in Europe often, implicitly or explicitly, assume that liberal-democratic regimes are the constituents of the MLG system. Compliance with a quite stringent set of criteria of liberal features and democratic traits is a requirement for becoming and remaining a member state of the EU. These so-called Copenhagen criteria, ranging from protection

of individual rights, equality before the law, free elections, to fair access to resources by competing parties, have been incorporated in the EU treaties and overall regulatory system, although they have met challenges in recent years from within the EU itself.

Developments within the very MLG studies have led scholars to revisiting some of the extant arrangements of representative democracy in light of the challenges that MLG frames pose to the accountability chain, in view of attempting to develop an outline for the renewal of democracy in Europe. An important source of challenges for democracy lies in the diffusion of transnational regimes. Piattoni (2015: 332) frames it as “the illusoriness of pursuing a notion of democracy based on delegation and accountability (in a conventional sense) which cannot obtain in interconnected settings [hence] showing that a fuller notion of democracy requires more than simple delegation-accountability relations.”

The big issue here is the delegation framework and challenges carried by transnational regimes and networks to accountability in representative democracy. MLG has been criticized for blurring accountability relations between democratic principals and their agents (Piattoni:2015), for having multiple principals and agents, namely the “many eyes and many hands” problem (Benz 2007, Papadopoulos 2007), and for causing chains of delegation and accountability to break down (Curtin 2007, Scharpf 2009). However, Piattoni contends (2015:335) that criteria of democratic legitimacy have changed or should change.

To begin with, we must squarely confront the challenge deriving from replacing government with governance: regardless of whether governance is ‘government plus’ or ‘government minus’ (Sbragia 2002: 6), it implies the inclusion in a public policymaking capacity of private subjects which have no democratic credential according to a delegation vision of democracy (Piattoni 2013). We must conclude that it is that vision which is by now at fault and that we must update our notion of democracy both for the national and for the inter- or supra-national setting.

Piattoni outlines elements for the redefinition of democracy in interconnected settings drawing on notions of non-domination (Pettit, 1997), tolerance (Weiler, 2003) and solidarity (Habermas, 2011). It is suggested (Piattoni, 2015:342) that this new and enlarged notion of “transnational democracy” may lead to more encompassing collective aims than decisions that are made in accordance with established democratic channels, by adopting a definition of “[d]emocracy [as] that set of institutions by which individuals are empowered as free and equal citizens to form and change the terms of their common life together, including democracy itself. In this sense, democracy is reflexive and consists of procedures by which its rules and practices are made subject to the deliberation of citizens themselves. Democracy is thus an ideal of self-determination, in that the terms and boundaries of democracy are made by citizens themselves and not others” (Bohman 2007: 2). Piattoni (2015: 342) further argues, “transnational democracy implies non-domination and this in turn

implies that the interests and ideas of all affected parties should be fully tracked for a decision, which potentially interferes with their freedom, to be considered legitimate”. In sum, as suggested by Piattoni, the outcome of this ambitious exercise of revisiting democracy is the contrivance of a set of arrangements in which citizens may be – and may feel to be – once again “empowered”, in the diverse and transnational context in which they now live, in the EU and beyond.

It should be noted that this initially sketched attempt at revisiting democracy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not waive nor bracket any of the tenets of liberal democracy: the universalism of individual rights of citizens and of human beings to be safeguarded and promoted; a radical notion of equality of citizens before the law; the very idea of empowering and engaging all citizens to shape the future of the political systems they belong to; and so on. The distinctiveness of liberal democracy from other political regimes is retained, yet it needs some reinventing, the argument goes.

How is this conceptual paraphernalia with regard to democracy related to the application of MLG to the Chinese context? Interestingly, this concern coincides with the ongoing discussion in China about the crisis of Western democracy, especially following the 2016 US presidential election. Western style democracy, while long being criticized as inappropriate for China, is now deemed by some in the Chinese academic circles as fundamentally flawed even for Western societies where it originally emerged. Instead, China has insisted on “socialism with Chinese

characteristics” as its path of political and economic development. Since the onset of reform in 1978, the performance of government in promoting economic development and social prosperity has gradually replaced political ideology to become the basis of regime legitimacy. This reflects China's cultural and political pragmatism, under which economic growth and social development have become political targets and tenets. This is a case of performance legitimacy, or “output legitimacy” (Scharpf: 1999), to borrow explicitly from the terminology of EU studies. It is performance, not representation, that is assumed to provide the foundation for the legitimacy of a political system.

Under this broad political context, legitimacy and effectiveness may replace democracy in providing fundamental conditions for MLG in China. In comparison with many other countries, China has a longer history of a centralized, large, and complex bureaucracy. It has always been a challenge to control and mobilize such a big apparatus which has its own complicated internal systems and dynamics. The pre-1978 political regime, while giving insiders privileges to access scarce resources, endeavored to deprive them of discretionary power and self-seeking capability. The reform since 1978 still takes place under an integrated political system, but has created new incentives by encouraging innovations and accepting, albeit informally, profit-making behavior of the bureaucracy on condition that such behavior is aligned with developmental purposes and state-building priorities. The marketization of the Chinese economy goes hand-in-hand with administrative decentralization, which

provides space for vertical and horizontal collaboration within and beyond the established bureaucratic relationships and which allows development dividends to be shared among multiple layers of government and with social actors. Economic performance has also provided a legitimacy foundation for China's exposure in the world. The economic benefits it has gained from opening up to the outside world offset the fear of external uncertainties and challenges.

The engagement of social organizations and private citizens in public governance has followed an incremental path in China. As performance indexes have been expanded to include social and environmental targets, private entrepreneurs and social elites have been increasingly absorbed into governance processes. Direct participation of citizens, such as participatory budgeting and citizen opinion surveys, has also taken place. There has been more informal sharing of power and responsibility through joint actions in response to pragmatic demands from society to build socioeconomic infrastructure, deliver public services, and handle other public issues. When governments work with external organizations for specific purposes, the latter may acquire, albeit often unintentionally, a certain degree of decision making power on issues concerning the distribution of welfare to citizens. Collaborative governance in the Chinese context may well be an unintended consequence instead of a designed policy outcome.

Hence, the general context and institutional setup of MLG in China is different from

that of the EU, and this may provide an intriguing case of comparison for public administration scholars of both Europe and China. The development of performance legitimacy as the foundation of public governance has created both intergovernmental and cross-sectional conditions for MLG to emerge in China. The distribution of authority associated with MLG arrangements may be seen as instrumental to regime preservation and development in China. It is argued, for example, that regimes with decentralized structures can be more resilient than highly centralized regimes because under decentralized structures local authorities take major responsibility for decisions (Hess, 2013:2-5). Following Hess, Hensengerth (2015: 303) further points out, “decentralization of authority in autocratic regimes, including the limited creation of public participation, does not necessarily lead to a breakdown of the regime. Rather, it can strengthen it by improving regime performance and creating controlled valves for popular grievances. As such, the distribution of authority is directly tied to the attempt of the government to achieve greater legitimacy through better performance by addressing capacity problems.” Pushing the argument further, it may be interpreted as a way of attempting to build legitimacy of some sort into the governance system, compounding arguments about the regime delivering on a common good, whereby all individual members of the community are ultimately better off, with arguments possibly evoking a more social contractual form of legitimacy *a la* Rousseau (see Bird, 2006; Ongaro, 2017). To borrow the terminology of EU studies again, what has taken place in China can be read more as the pursuit of an “output legitimacy”, a legitimacy dependent on the outputs/outcomes of the public policies produced by the

political system, than an input legitimacy, a legitimacy based on how in the first instance decision-makers are selected.

We would like to conclude this essay by drawing a fascinating yet possibly hazardous and overstretched parallel: the development of MLG may be part and parcel of a process of building legitimacy for the political regime in China, just as it may be a way of exploring paths for the renewal of beleaguered traditional liberal democracy in Europe. Albeit following profoundly different trajectories, China and Europe (and policy-makers and intellectuals in these two regions) might adopt MLG not just as a tool of analysis employed by detached beholders but also for a very purposive and highly ambitious course of action: that is, to enhance the legitimacy of the respective political systems and buttress their very foundations. This is indeed a strongly normative and purposive application of MLG.

### **Acknowledgements**

A workshop on this topic was organized in November 2016 cosponsored by the School of International Relations and Public Affairs and the Dr. Seaker Chan Center for Comparative Political Development Studies, Fudan University. It explored various theoretical issues concerning MLG and especially its application in China's context. The workshop provided an opportunity to discuss a range of papers, some of which are included in this special issue. Ting Gong acknowledges the funding support of the

Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (projects No.9242104; No. 9042596) and City University of Hong Kong (project# 6354020). Yijia Jing acknowledges support by the National Science Foundation of China (Grant 71490735), the National Social Science Foundation of China (Grant 15ZDA031), and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2016S1A3A2924956).

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