Sino-Libyan Relations in the post-*Jamahiriya* Era:

the Logic of Exploring Overseas Market(s)

**ABSTRACT**

The Sino-Libyan relations witnessed a lukewarm history with no too much common ground from 1978 until 2010. Yet, the Chinese SOEs’ short but impressive performance in Libya’s construction sector before the 2011 conflict has already planted the foundations, shallow though they may be, for mutual trust and confidence in future cooperation, in particular in the light of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. While post-*Jamahiriya* Sino-Libyan relations will be based on and continue the contracted project-based economic cooperation, the ongoing multilateral consultation and dialogue for a political settlement for Libya bring historical opportunity for both Libya and China to explore a broader cooperation framework that positions both countries’ mutual interests in the 21st century’s concepts of a new international order and of security, though this will be a quite challenging task for both sides.

**INTRODUCTION**

There are a number of analytical and methodological obstacles to overcome in the modelling of scenarios for Sino-Libyan relations in the post-*Jamahiriya* era. To be precise, there are few sources, covering a limited range of topics, available. Of the English language literature published before the outbreak of the Libyan civil armed conflict in February 2011, as panelist Geoff D. Porter remarked at “The Maghreb in Transition” conference held by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) in October 2012, “books [about Libya] … were written twenty years ago, and based on research that has been conducted thirty years ago.”[[1]](#footnote-2) This noticeable lag is partly attributable to the fact that Qaddafi “authorized very little research on his country and kept Libya closed to journalists and researchers for many years.”[[2]](#footnote-3) The Chinese language literature provides even fewer sources. Except for *Taida yiyuan Libiya yilao fuwudui: 1964 nian 1 yue zhi 1968 nian 6 yue* (*Medical Aid Team of Taiwan University Hospital in Libya: January 1964 until June 1968*) published by Taiwan National University, there are only a small number of individual accounts in the form of short essays or blogs, recounting personal working and living experiences in Libya in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, most of these concern the Republic of China (i.e. Taiwanese) memories of Libya, not those of people coming from mainland China.

Another outcome of Qaddafi’s exclusiveness is the scholarly literature’s heavy reliance on qualitative methodology. As Susanne T. Tempelhof and Manal M. Omar state, “most accounts are solely qualitative…and none is a serious quantitative approach for a deeper understanding.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Therefore, considering the paucity of the secondary literature, in understanding Sino-Libyan relations in the post-*Jamahiriya* era, a quantitative reference for a tentative prognosis on the bilateral relations’ future can only be achieved through a micro-level anatomy of the short-lived community of Chinese migrants in Libya, the demographic expansion and transiency of which took place in the last four years or so of the *Jamahiriya* regime. Particularly important in this analysis is the thrust of its market re-orientation and re-localization as well as its intricate internal organization.

This paper first positions discussion of Sino-Libyan relations in the 20th century in the broader narrative of Sino-Arab relations. In so doing, I aim to tease out the particularity in Sino-Libyan case. Then, I direct my focus on Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private entrepreneurs, tracing their ups and downs in exploring the Libyan market since UN’s lifting of sanction on Libya in 2003 until the collapse of the *Jamahiriya* regime, and investigating how they adapted themselves, if at all, to the volatile local business milieu, all the while forming an interlocked community network as a responsive mechanism. This is followed by a brief review of China’s political behaviors of handling the Libyan crisis since the outbreak of the civil armed conflict in February 2011. Then, before providing my interpretation of China’s responses, I problematize the employment of the Libyan case in Sino-Arab related debates by quantitative evidence, suggesting a re-evaluation of China’s political and economic weight in pre-2011 Libya before developing any argumentation. Finally, I propose two main predicaments both China and Libya will confront in the course of developing bilateral relations, followed by a prognosis of the formation and pattern of the next large-scale Chinese demographic influx.

This research paper draws on primary and secondary sources in Arabic, Chinese and English, employing qualitative and quantitative methods. The primary sources comprise field notes of my direct auto-ethnographic observation from October 2007 until June 2011, as well as copies of my semi-structured interviews, formal and informal conversations with Chinese migrants in Libya and the local people. The secondary literature provides historical and academic discourse contexts. I argue that while post-*Jamahiriya* Sino-Libyan relations will be based on and continue the contracted project-based economic cooperation, the ongoing multilateral consultation and dialogue for a political settlement for Libya bring historical opportunity for both Libya and China to explore a broader cooperation framework that positions both countries’ mutual interests in the 21st century’s concepts of a new international order and of security, though this will be a quite challenging task for both sides.

**SINO-LIBYAN RELATIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the intertwining of international and regional power dynamics created common grounds for the linkage between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and some Arab countries. These links operated culturally, economically, and eventually politically. Though geopolitically within the “intermediate zone,”[[4]](#footnote-5) the Kingdom of Libya (1951-69) had no connection with the PRC, nor interest in approaching it, or the Chinese people in a broader sense. This is primarily because of the western colonial powers’ heavy involvement in Libya’s sovereign state establishment and modern state building.

Due to the growing intensity of the cold war, four Great Powers of France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), United Kingdom and the United States could not find “a commonly acceptable political solution to the future of the three former Italian colonies [of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan],”[[5]](#footnote-6) thus, they submitted the case to the General Assembly of UN, with UN’s taking up on 15 September 1948.[[6]](#footnote-7) In catering to “the strategic purpose of the West,”[[7]](#footnote-8) UN Resolution 289 A (IV), which proposed Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan’s unification for a provisional government of Libya, was adopted by the General Assembly on 21 November 1949. Two years later, modern-day Libya was officially and artificially constructed.

As a sovereign state, Libya’s foreign relations were regulated by Anglo-Libyan treaties.[[8]](#footnote-9) After three years of negotiation, the Treaty of Alliance between Libya and Great Brain was signed in 1953. According to Article One of the Treaty, each party “undert[ook] not to adopt in regard to foreign countries an attitude which [wa]s inconsistent with the alliance or which might create difficulties for the other party.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Libya’s negotiations with the United States proceeded over the same time period and resulted in the Wheelus Base agreement in September 1954, the general purpose of which included “strengthen[ing] the firm friendship…[and] confirming their determination to co-operate amicably and to support each other mutually in the international field.”[[10]](#footnote-11) In August of the following year, a French treaty was signed, with an agreement producing “the final rectification of Libya’s frontiers in favor of the French territories in Africa.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

In addition to these cornerstones, defined by treaty obligations, of Libya’s foreign policy, the memory of Libya’s colonial experience made King Idris wary of involving Libya in international complications, which might expose his country to dangers.[[12]](#footnote-13) Thus, when the U.S. proposed economic and military program in 1957 to the Arab countries for the sake of counterbalancing the expansion of Communist elements in the region, Libya “accepted the Eisenhower Doctrine as a matter of principle, not as a *quid pro quo* for material reward,”[[13]](#footnote-14) though, in return, it received financial assistance of seven million dollars the same year.[[14]](#footnote-15)

In 1959, diplomatic relations between Libya and the Republic of China (ROC), then the only Chinese government recognized by the UN, was established. Since then, medical specialists and agricultural experts were dispatched to Libya under the framework of the ROC’s foreign aid policy, in particular the Vanguard Project.[[15]](#footnote-16) Though economic incentives and humanitarian initiatives were among the means that both the nationalist-led ROC and the communist PRC employed in their diplomatic competitions over the 1950s and 1960s to obtain the seat in the UN as the sole legitimate representative of China, the Libyan case should not be interpreted as an indicator of Libya’s confirmation of its loyalty to and alliance with the U.S. in anti-communism, nor of Taiwan’s diplomatic victory over the PRC in one international scene. Instead, Taiwan’s successful presence in Libya was no more than one “spoke” of a U.S.-driven and -centered global deployment in battling communism.[[16]](#footnote-17) Libya showed no intention of *developing* its relations with Taiwan.

With the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, and the establishment of the PRC on Mainland China, the U.S. saw the growth of communism as a major security concern in East Asia. Thus, it provided agricultural assistance to support Taiwan as “an active anti-communist ally in East Asia.”[[17]](#footnote-18) A recipient of the U.S. technical knowledge in the early 1950s,[[18]](#footnote-19) Taiwan transmitted agricultural know-how in the 1960s to the third world including Libya, in a project known as known as the Vanguard Project, with two thirds of the financing coming from the USA.[[19]](#footnote-20) One member of the Vanguard Project’s last team in Libya recalled that the Libyan agricultural ministry had no interest in developing the agricultural sector under his team’s technical assistance, even after his team’s success in planting rice in the desert city of Brak in 1962, and eventually “expelled” his team in 1969.[[20]](#footnote-21)

The 1969 coup d’etat overthrew the Monarchy and opened up a four-decade *Jamahiriya* era under the reign of Muammar Qaddafi. Unlike his predecessor, Qaddafi actively engaged himself in foreign affairs from the very beginning.[[21]](#footnote-22) Though he approached the PRC immediately after gaining the power (in 1970, he assigned a close aide to Beijing, with a cooperative proposal for producing nuclear weapon),[[22]](#footnote-23) the first decade saw no necessity for closer connections between the two countries.

Before 1979, the PRC’s foreign policy toward Arab countries was driven solely by security considerations connected to avoiding the hegemony of the superpowers,[[23]](#footnote-24) in particular Soviet expansion. In other words, the development of bilateral relations “w[as] governed mainly by [China’s] perception of [Arab countries’] attitude toward the Soviet Union and the degree of their independence.”[[24]](#footnote-25) Since 1969, with the restoration of suspended relations with the governments of Syria, the Yemen, Egypt, and Iraq, and its admission to the UN, Beijing adapted a more pragmatic approach in the region. While “preference was given to relations with established governments…[and] interest in revolution declined considerably,”[[25]](#footnote-26) it provided support, verbally, materially, and militarily, though with carefulness and selection, to the local national liberation movements.[[26]](#footnote-27)

Qaddafi’s political behavior in the 1970s, both domestically and internationally, could hardly fit Libya into China’s framework of foreign policy-orientation for at least two reasons. First, Qaddafi’s *al Fateh* revolution made little sense to China. Instead of a real anti-imperialist mass-participation mobilization on the ground, one of its main domestic exercises was the construction of a nationalist identity through a unifying narrative of the colonial and monarchy history—a Libyan history of being “a cohesive, nationalist, anti-imperialist society, loyal to its Arab and Muslim culture, opposed to Western political and cultural domination, and actively participating in world history,”[[27]](#footnote-28) and this was in the service of the legitimacy of his *Jamahiriya* regime. But China was not interested in the social-political nature of the Arab governments in general.[[28]](#footnote-29) Second, the pursuit of pan-Arabism was Qaddafi’s political ambition in the region in the 1970s. In doing so, he firmly followed “the Nasserite precept of the hegemony of the military,”[[29]](#footnote-30) and formed an alliance with the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s, which turned Moscow into Libya’s major weapons supplier.[[30]](#footnote-31) Therefore, in term of the Sino-Libya relations, there is no surprise to see that Libya voted in favor of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, which recognized the PRC government as the only legitimate representative of China to the UN in 1971, but it was not until 1978 that the official diplomatic relation was established.

Since then, cooperation was carried out under the framework of the Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (JCCT), and bilateral agreements in the fields of medicine, culture, technology and economy. These mechanisms, serving to strengthening China’s interdependence with Arab countries since the 1980s, did not create a very important legacy which might have contributed to Sino-Libyan further mutual understanding and cooperation in the next century.[[31]](#footnote-32) However, it exposed both sides to cooperation for the first time and encouraged them to explore common ground.

Foreign policy in both countries was partly determined by national interests. For China, it focused on internal development of the Four Modernizations, deeming globalization (incorporating itself into the world economy) as the means and external security as a necessary condition to achieve this. Thus, China increased commercial and trading activities with the Arab countries on the one hand, and sought to generate a cooperative stable environment on the other hand. As to Libya, as aforementioned, for the sake of the pursuit of the pan-Arab unity and Qaddafi's other political ideologies, activism and adventurism (involvement with terrorism and revolutionary movement overseas) were the main features of his foreign policy. It’s this fundamental divergence in the two countries' positioning the international context vis-à-vis each's internal needs that ensured that bilateral relations would remain lukewarm through the end of the 20th century.

**THE DEMOGRAPHIC EXPANSION AND TRANSIENCY OF THE CHINESE MIGRANT COMMUNITY**

**2003-2006: The Failure of the Chinese Private Capital Investments**

As the vanguard of China’s development of a private economy, Wenzhou people were also the pioneers for Chinese entry the Libyan market upon UN’s lifting of sanction on Libya in 2003. Their immediate approaching this untouched field is no more than the continuing expansion of their global share of commodities during the period of China’s opening-up policy and Going Out policy. Their approach was notably marked by the duplication of the Chinese Commodity City (CCC), a model which had been demonstrated to be successful in several other markets, such as Douala (1999), Rotterdam (2002), and Dubai (2003).

The internationally-oriented decentralization,[[32]](#footnote-33) brought about by the policy of reform and opening to the outside world since 1979, endowed China’s coastal provinces with considerably autonomy in conducting foreign trade and overseas investment, and “transform[ed] them into internationally-oriented and self-motivated developmental entities.”[[33]](#footnote-34) Albeit headed by “a conservative and risk-averse leadership” in its economic transformation,[[34]](#footnote-35) Zhejiang Province navigated itself into the global market by the export-oriented economy, the backbone of which is Wenzhou people’s specialized production of “petty commodities” driven by the Wenzhou Economic Model.[[35]](#footnote-36) The official proposal of Going Out policy in 2000, as well as China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, these two turning points together accelerated the local government’s participation in supporting and regulating the overseas investment behaviors of Zhejiang individual traders and private entrepreneurs, to increase the overall competitiveness in the foreign market. One such early practice is the establishment of the CCC. Its operational mechanism is that Zhejiang investor(s), in most cases small or middle-sized private entrepreneurs from Wenzhou, purchase a local building first and open up a shopping complex to function as a hub for Zhejiang petty commodities’ transnational distribution. Then, through provision of assistance and facilities in terms of foreign investment policy, logistics, etc. bi-directionally from Zhejiang government, and the foreign local government and/or Wenzhou migrant community, they assemble others from the same hometown to rent and open a shop in this shopping complex.

The coincidence of the outbreak of the Iraq War and the UN’s lifting of sanction on Libya in 2003 convinced Chen Zhiyuan, the former director of the Wenzhou Chamber of Commerce in Dubai, to form another plan for the CCC model in Tripoli instead of Amman and Khartoum in the same year. Speaking retrospectively about his first exploratory trip to Libya in 2003, Chen explained that:

We could not wait any more, because we lost tens of millions of US dollars on account of the Iraq War. Our only choice is [to] try to make up our losses after the war. . . . The purpose of flying [to] Libya is to find opportunities to introduce Zhejiang merchandise into the post-war Iraqi market[through Libyan businessmen], a strategy we could call an ‘outflanking tactic’… [on my first visit]there were very few passengers on the plane to Libya, which was worrying, but when I thought of the huge market in post-war Iraq, I told myself that I had to go to Libya, that’s the first stop [of the tour to Libya, Jordan, and Sudan].[[36]](#footnote-37)

Soon after Chen’s visit, in November 2004, an agreement over the establishment of the CCC in Tripoli was signed between the China Commodity City Company, of which Chen was the CEO, and the Libyan Ministry of Economy and Trade. According to the agreement, Libyan and Chinese businessmen or companies could sign import-export contracts concerning Chinese products displayed at the CCC. The products could only be sold at the CCC through a commercial agency registered in Libya.[[37]](#footnote-38) A seven-floor shopping complex in the downtown of Tripoli witnessed a few months of flourishing business potentials, but suddenly disappeared over a fire accident in 2006, reminiscent of the failure of Sao Paulo’s CCC (the first one overseas) soon after its establishment in 1998. The rumor that Libyan rivals were behind an arson attack circulated locally.[[38]](#footnote-39)

While most of the CCC-organized Wenzhou traders withdrew, a few dozen remained there for a short period of several months, looking forward to the opportunities which would be brought about by Libya’s economic liberalization. One typical case is Peng, a Kuwait-based footwear wholesaler, who arrived in Tripoli in 2006. In an interview, he explained his marketing strategy:

Apart from footwear wholesaling, I rented a warehouse here, and put a lot of wooden doors and security doors in storage there. I noticed that the price of these two types of doors is very high here, while the quality is mediocre. As soon as the local government loosens its policy, the construction market will start to boom, and there will be quite a large demand for wooden and security doors. What I’m doing now is waiting for that day to come, and I can corner the local market. At that point, the doors I’ve got in storage will yield considerable profits.[[39]](#footnote-40)

However, while Libya’s move toward liberalization of its economy since 1988 allowed the greater scope to the local private enterprise in the retail trade,[[40]](#footnote-41) it left extremely few niche for Chinese purveyors of cheap merchandises. By 2007, there are probably only two successful investment cases, but their story was the exception rather than the rule. One Wenzhou couple shipped containers of nightgowns from their own manufacturing factories to Libya. They did not open shop locally, but instead, rented a basement and sold it to the local clothing retailers who lacked the means to travel to China directly for import in large quantity.[[41]](#footnote-42) Al Maida Chinese restaurant opened on 2007’s New Year’s Eve, and remains open until the present. In retrospect to the original idea of opening such a restaurant in Tripoli, the daughter of one of the Chinese founders recalled:

We all come from Quzhou City [in Zhejiang], famous for its mushrooms. My mother’s first visit to Libya was in 2003, when she came with two other [Chinese] women of about her age. None of them had any overseas experience. In China, my mother sold vegetables at the market, while [the other] woman worked at the local medical station, making up the prescriptions, and the third one operated a textile shop. The initial opportunity was because of a Libyan businessman who was looking for Chinese technical workers who would work with him to grow mushrooms in Libya. Through introductions by several middlemen, he finally got in touch with my mother and the two other Chinese women. The first visit to Libya to conduct market research was not satisfactory, since the natural conditions in Libya are not hospitable to mushroom cultivation. Considering the tens of thousands of RMB spent on the trip to Libya, they decided after consultation to open a Chinese restaurant there, as a result of their Libyan market research, as well as to effect a compromise vis-a-vis their Libyan partner. After a series of preparations both in China and in Libya, the restaurant was finally opened for New Year’s Eve in 2007.[[42]](#footnote-43)

**2007-2010: Contracted Project-Based Economic Cooperation**

During the first half of 2007, we were all anxious, unsure whether the restaurant could turn a profit or not. At the time, almost all our customers were those working at foreign embassies or Chinese staff working for ZTE corporation [the Chinese provider of telecommunications equipment and network solutions in Libya]. However, starting in the autumn of 2007, things began to get better for us. Chinese people started to come to Libya to undertake market research, and most of them were directors and engineers from Chinese construction companies, as well as bosses of private companies. Later, as everyone saw, many SOEs signed construction contracts with the Libyan government, and subsequently hundreds, thousands, and then tens of thousands of labors came. We won our gamble on opening the restaurant.[[43]](#footnote-44)

As the daughter of one of the shareholders of Tripoli’s al Maida Chinese restaurant observed, the SOEs are the backbone of the Chinese migrant community there, the population of which increased rapidly from few hundred to more than thirty-five thousand within four years. This is the consequence of both pushing and pulling factors. For China, in April 2003, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Finance, and the People’s Bank of China together issued “Several Suggestions on Supporting Our Country’s Enterprises to Conduct Construction Project Overseas with Financial Capital” (《关于支持我国企业带资承包国外工程的若干意见》),[[44]](#footnote-45) providing more financial support to the companies implementing construction project overseas, and in 2004, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Finance complemented “Temporary Methods of Managing the Outward Guarantee Under Government Special Fund For Overseas Construction” (《对外承包工程保函风险专项资金管理暂行办法》), increasing the bank guarantee’s quota.[[45]](#footnote-46) In October 2005, on the Fifth Session of the sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party China further encouraged enterprises’ overseas investment and transnational management, in particular in construction sector and labor supply.[[46]](#footnote-47) From the Libyan side, since the end of 2006, Libya initiated a “multi-billion dollar infrastructure development plan focused on the renovating and construction of airports, roads, housing, schools, hospitals, and water and sanitation projects nation-wide, as well as the Railway Project.”[[47]](#footnote-48)

However, one detail is critical. Though ranked No.1 in terms of the total number of contractors being evaluated within “the World’s Top 225 International Contractors” announced by ENR-Engineering News Record, Chinese construction companies’ presence in Libya manifested a low-level homogeneity in at least three aspects, compared to their counterparts of some other countries, such as Turkey, Italy, South Korea, and Japan. First, the type of the project is mainly either housing units or infrastructure.[[48]](#footnote-49) Labor intensity and low-tech requirements in constructing these projects determine the relatively low price of each meter, despite the high overall value of the contract. Second, most of the construction sites are in the desert, being isolated from the town, and with little access to water, electricity and transportation. Third, they do not participate in the design, which inevitably increases the potential risks of project cost control. Some Chinese private enterprises once targeted the middle-sized project of other types, such as hospital renovation and shopping mall construction, but none succeeded. While welcoming the Chinese SOEs (locally registered as overseas branch office of its mother company in China) in their capacity to issuing bank guarantees for large projects due to the Chinese state’s enormous financial and policy support, Libya’s construction market does not leave space for the Chinese private contractors to localize in the same form of entity as independent overseas branch office, but instead, to be registered as joint-venture with 51 percent of registration capital from the Libyan partner. In general, the Chinese companies remained conservative and cautious about this form of cooperation when the overall external investment environment remained unfamiliar.

To maximally reduce investment risks overseas, several Chinese private entrepreneurs and traders sought to bind their businesses to the SOE-signed contracted project and/or the SOE-driven migrant community, to assure the stability of their custom pool and profit source. A Wuhan-based private entrepreneur opened a quarry in al Aziziyah (a region of quarry assemblage not far from Tripoli) to extract aggregates and exclusively supply them to Chinese construction contractors there. Similarly, one hair salon in Janzoor (on the outskirts of Tripoli), though not officially registered, sent Chinese barbers to Chinese construction sites on the weekends, providing hairdressing services to labors there.

**CHINA’S REFRAINS FROM INTERVENING IN LIBYAN AFFAIRS**

On 15 February 2011, anti-government unrest took place in Benghazi, sparking a nine-month civil armed conflict between forces loyal to Libyan former leader Muammar Gaddafi and those led by the National Transitional Council (NTC) and seeking to oust his government. The result of the conflict was the end to Qaddafi and the *Jamahiriya* regime. But the post-Qaddafi era did not usher in the expected period of peace and democracy by the 17 February revolutionists,[[49]](#footnote-50) and descended instead into another ongoing episode of complex domestic alliances, “riven with rivalries of almost every stripe—regional, ethnic, linguistic, ideological or simply historical grievances between cities or towns,”[[50]](#footnote-51) and evolving into a “tripartite power struggle… between government forces, secular forces and jihadist forces.”[[51]](#footnote-52)

China made an impressive first response to these developments. Based upon report from the Chinese embassy in Tripoli and China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on 22 February, the State Council set up an emergency team headed by Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang and with the involvement of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to organize the mass evacuation for the sake of overseas citizen protection. In the following twelve days, a total number of 35,860 Chinese nationals were safely transported to the home country or a third country through overland, sea or air route, with only ten to fifteen electing to stay.[[52]](#footnote-53) China’s ensuing actions are described by some western observers as “extremely cautious.”[[53]](#footnote-54) Like Brazil, Germany, India and Russia, China abstained on UN Resolution 1973 on 17 March 2011, and it did not recognize the NTC as the legitimate representative of Libya until 12th September 2011, being the last UN Security Council member to do so. In addition, China has insisted that the UN leadership should seek a political settlement, while keeping a low profile on international conferences on Libyan affairs.[[54]](#footnote-55)

China’s political actions in coping with Libyan affairs have been scrutinized and analyzed within different contexts and discourses, including the relations between “China’s traditional adherence to a classical understanding of state sovereignty and non-intervention” and Responsibility to Protect (R2P),[[55]](#footnote-56) its economic and citizen security interests in the Middle East and Africa, China’s hedging strategy in the Syrian Crisis, etc. Except for a few researchers paying attention to the quantitative analysis that helps to understand the formation of the political behavior *itself*, most are more interested in utilizing it as one of the many facts on a macro-level analysis, to serve as supporting evidence in the argumentation which constructs various debates on Sino-Arab contact. The interpretation of China’s political behaviors in a vacuum, without attention to historical and regional intricacy, can lead to errors and sometimes even the misuse of the Libyan case for a valid broader discussion. One basic pitfall that many literatures share, influencing the thrust of the whole argumentation, is the isolated, one-sided and overstated perception of the Chinese political and economic weight in pre-2011 Libya.

As previous sections revealed, the PRC and Libya have never been “revolutionary allies,”[[56]](#footnote-57) nor do they have any common ground for such an ideological or strategic alliance. Instead, it is the economic interdependence, as an inevitable byproduct of globalization, that gives rise to the diplomatic linkage of the two countries since 1978, and gradually developed basically in the form of contracted project, in particular from 2007 to 2010. The recent and lukewarm nature of the bilateral relations has been clearly manifested in China’s minor economic share of the Libyan economic market, compared either to China’s activities in other Arab and African countries, or to its rivals’ share in Libya. From 2003 until 2010, China’s outward foreign direct investment (ODI) in Libya is extremely limited, accounting for less than 1% of China’s overall ODI flows into Africa.[[57]](#footnote-58) The enormous total contract value of almost $ 19 billion that Chinese companies signed with Libya, which has been frequently addressed in many discussions, is of indirect investment of service and labor supply, rather than supply of financial capital. In addition, by 2010, 75% of the construction market was owned by Turkish contractors,[[58]](#footnote-59) and the projects that allocated to Chinese contractors were universally labor-intensive, low-tech and big-size housing units or infrastructure. Similarly, in the oil sector, Chinese companies offered infrastructure service in the oilfield, and were given no access to acquisitions of oil and gas properties. In 2009, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) intended to purchase Verenex Energy Inc., a Canadian oil company, the main overseas market of which is Libya. However, the Libyan government did not approve this proposal, resulting in the abortion of the purchase plan after the CNPC had waited six months for the deal to be approved.

For China, what makes the Libyan case particularly thorny to handle is its unprecedentedness in terms of UN responsibilities.[[59]](#footnote-60) First, “[for] the first time the [Security] Council had authorized the use of force for civilian protection purposes against the wishes of a host state;”[[60]](#footnote-61) second, the “concrete international action [that] was taken was remarkably rapid by Security Council standards.”[[61]](#footnote-62) With “serious difficulty with parts of the resolution,”[[62]](#footnote-63) China allowed the passage of the Resolution 1973 by abstention. This is mainly because China, as well as other four Security Council members, “believed that they could not legitimize inaction in the face of mass atrocities.”[[63]](#footnote-64) Emerging as a global power, China has started looking outward, “[being] much more concerned about national image” and “attach[ing] more importance to soft power.”[[64]](#footnote-65) Voting that allows the continuity of the anti-civilian armed suppression would cause criticism of China, which definitely harms its reputation that has been established in the long process of China’s initiatives of and participation in multi-literal consultation and dialogue in the international affairs.[[65]](#footnote-66)

**PROGNOSIS**

Though enormously visible in the Libyan crisis, China’s overseas economic and citizen security risks did not act as “a wake-up call” in the words of political economist Chris Alden,[[66]](#footnote-67) since this is not a newly emerged issue. In the context of a long history of migration overseas, China has been concerned with the protection overseas Chinese interests as early as back to Qing Dynasty (1644-1912),[[67]](#footnote-68) as well as the experience of organizing non-combatant evacuation operation (NEOs) for more than five decades, reaching Southeast Asia, the Gulf, and the Middle East,[[68]](#footnote-69) and most recently North Africa. In economic aspect, the 1997 Asian financial crisis directed Chinese military planners’ attention to “the importance of economic security as a critical component of the country’s overall national security.”[[69]](#footnote-70) Legislatively, in 2005, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council enacted “Suggestions on Strengthening Protection of State-owned Enterprises, Institutions and Staffs Overseas” (《关于加强境外中资企业、机构和人员安全保护工作的意见》).[[70]](#footnote-71)

Yet, this is by no means to imply that the Libyan crisis raises no alarms in China. Instead, as one of many episodes occurring in the “discovery process” of China’s going global and integration into the world economy,[[71]](#footnote-72) China’s economic and political experience in the Libyan case is an indication that while continuing the regional and international interdependence as a means to foster cooperation.[[72]](#footnote-73) China’s independent foreign policy has also been constrained by its increasing and deepening involvement in foreign affairs. Therefore, the lessons China *adaptively* learnt from the Libyan case in promoting its performance in the international community are at least as important as China’s concern for the future development of the bilateral relations.

Though many observers perceive China’s failure to support the NTC during the latter’s political competition with the *Jamahiriya* regime as a negative decision, the Sino-Libyan relations’ future development is fundamentally constrained by the legacy of the West’s deep and historically rooted involvement in almost every aspect of Libya’s development as a modern sovereignty state. This manifests mainly as two predicaments for the both countries. First, on the multilateral negotiation and conciliation table for a political settlement of Libya, there is not a great deal of space between China and Libya that could be in favor of both countries’ national and regional interests, and China’s joint developmental blueprint of the Belt and Road Initiative could hardly be integrated into the negotiation agenda. On one hand, NATO Allies and their Arab non-NATO partners (Qatar, Jordan, United Arab Emirates)’s heavy interference and investment, rhetorically, militarily and politically, in assisting the rebels to unseat Muammar Qaddafi determines that the post-Qaddafi political business of re-distributing the domestic political power is accompanied with the process of negotiating distribution of political and economic interests with these main foreign actors once contributed to overthrowing the former regime. On the other hand, many Libyan actors in or behind today’s political arena were once in exile (mostly in Europe or the U.S.) under Qaddafi’s reign. The western imprint on them greatly influences the formation and orientation of their view of where Libya’s interests lie in, and how it is connected to the broader regional and international geopolitical pattern. Obviously, China hardly fits into their foci.

Granted, the Libyan business sojourners, whose coming to and settling down in China’s main cities, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Yiwu, and Hangzhou, could be traced back to the late 1990s, seem to be in the most approximate position to play a vital and positive role in promoting the bilateral relations, in particular the localization and implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Libya. However, two observations, alongside a lack of quantitative references, indicate the complexity in analyzing this group’s potential contributions. First, similar with the experience of their Chinese counterparts in pre-2011 Libya, joint-venture has not been a business model adopted favorably and successfully by Libyans in China. Their business activities mainly include export trading and cargo shipping service, in which they, as the foreigners, own sole proprietorship. Second, as a strategic response to China’s ongoing adjustment of its domestic industrial structure, many Libyan businessmen choose to build up a transnational network, being based in Guangzhou, registered in Hong Kong due to its liberal foreign exchange control policy, and approaching new commodity manufacturers in Bangladesh and some Southeastern Asian countries, in particular Malaysia and Vietnam. Thus, it remains far from clarity, on both a micro- and meso-level, of the orders and thrusts of the Libyan business migrants’ marketing re-orientation, re-localization and adjustments in confronting their home country’s political and social transformation, as well as China’s 21st century political economic policy toward the Arab countries at large.

The second predicament is that China’s alternatives of cooperation to participate, on an official, institutional or civilian level, in Libya’s reconstruction are very limited, albeit the One Belt and Road Initiative. As aforementioned, Mainland China had no presence of any form in Libya until 1978, and since then its presence has mainly been based on contracted construction project. This indicates that compared to some other countries, China lacks foundation, disposal sources, experience and know-how in many fields. Dutch academic collaboration with Libya can provide an appropriate contrast. Though no direct participation in the multilateral process of planned decolonizing Libya under the auspices of the UN from 1949 to 1951, the Netherlands left an imprint on the foundation of Libya’s legal system. Adriaan Pelt, then the Dutch UN commissioner for Libya, drafted the 1951 Libyan constitution, which is regarded as “an important reference point” for post-Qaddafi Libya’s transition to democracy.[[73]](#footnote-74) Immediately after the collapse of the *Jamahiriya* regime, the Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Development of Leiden University (VVI/LU) considered focusing a research project on Libya, and successfully approached the Benghazi Centre for Research and Consulting, and the Law Faculty of Benghazi University in 2012 for initiating the research project Access to Justice and Institutional Development in Libya (AJIDIL).[[74]](#footnote-75) Since then, fieldwork was conducted in 2012 and 2013, with achievement of book-length report publication. In 2014, these two universities started a joint project in social-legal studies, in the forms of research, training and policy advice.[[75]](#footnote-76) No such opportunities have existed for Chinese scholars, educators, or institutions in the nearly forty years of diplomatic relations.

Infrastructure construction seems to be the most practical entry point through which China could immediately get involved in Libya’s reconstruction. This has been substantiated by positive actions from the Chinese side. In February 2012, a team led by the Department of Outward Investment and Economic Cooperation of the PRC’s Ministry of Commerce paid a visit to Libya, investigating Chinese losses, meeting with the Libyan officials, and evaluating the viability of continuing the halted projects.[[76]](#footnote-77) Several construction companies and Huawei have returned to Libya, with approximately nine hundred Chinese nationals working there by 2014.[[77]](#footnote-78)

It is thus quite likely that an influx of Chinese SOEs will occur, as the first group of Chinese to enter into Libya’s (infrastructure construction) market, once Libya achieves social and political stability. The push factor of the Belt and Road Initiative should not be overestimated in accounting for such a trend. But more profoundly, the Chinese SOEs’ short but impressive performance in Libya’s construction sector before the 2011 conflict has already planted the foundations, shallow though they may be, for mutual trust and confidence in future cooperation. Notably, in the second half of 2010, Libya started to show a cooperative response to the enormous Chinese presence, which once been criticized by then Libyan Foreign Minister Musa Kusa as of “something akin to a Chinese invasion of the African continent… [that] brings to mind the effects that colonialism had on the African continent [in the past] from the creation of settlements to the dispersal of African communities.”[[78]](#footnote-79) For instance, Libya’s state-owned Afriqiyah Airways launched weekly direct flights between Tripoli and Beijing, and Tripoli and Guangzhou. It offered the lowest round-trip ticket price compared to the options offered by airline companies such as Qatar Airways, Turkish Airlines, Egypt Air, Emirates Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Lufthansa and Alitalia Airways, clearly targeting the SOE labor migrant group. In addition, new regulations aiming at facilitating the visa application procedure for Chinese labor migrants were issued. Libya-registered Chinese companies were requested to submit a list of the types and numbers of workers to arrive in Libya for the whole following years. The Libyan immigrant authority then passed on its approval of the quota to the Libyan embassy in Beijing.

Following the SOEs, private entrepreneurs will also show substantial interests in the Libyan market (and again, needless to say, the Belt and Road Initiative will be the major macro-level push factor). In spite of the accumulation of lessons and experiences in exploring overseas market(s), in particular in the Arab world and the African continent in the recent one decade or so, they could hardly avoid a long time period, demanding patience, of local market investigation, peer observation, negotiation with potential Libyan partners, and local policy research, until their assurance of and success in pinpointing the niche and making local adaptations. This will be an inevitable experience, considering the fact that there were few successful collaborative cases before 2011, which suggests the lack of a mutually accepted standard and business mechanism.

**CONCLUSION**

Since its establishment as a sovereign state in 1951, the Kingdom of Libya’s foreign relations were regulated by a series of Anglo-Libyan treaties signed with the Great Britain, the U.S., France and Italy respectively. The treaty obligations, as well as King Idris’s declination to involve his country with international complications, let Libya, unlike its neighboring countries, have no interest in building up the linkage with China. Qaddafi’s mapping of the *Jamahiriya* Libya’s regional interests welcomed cooperation with China, in particular in terms of nuclear technology. However, there was little convergence between the thrust of the two countries’ foreign policies. While Libya was on the track of *al Fateh* revolution, applying activism and adventurism to pursue pan-Arabism regionally, and to guarantee legitimacy of the Qaddafi regime domestically, China strove to incorporate itself into the world economy and to create a stable external security environment, which served its internal development of the Four Modernizations. This led to lukewarm bilateral relations from 1978 until 2010.

Libya remains in the midst of armed competition for the re-distribution political power hitherto. In Libyan affairs, China maintains that UN leadership must proceed through multilateral consultation and dialogue for a political settlement for Libya. In the near future, China’s political behavior on foreign affairs will likely continue to follow its established precepts such as non-intervention and independent diplomacy. Though receiving some criticism, China’s coping with the Libyan crisis, in particular its belated recognition of the NTC, will not yield substantial negative influence on the future development of the bilateral relations. As a late-comer, China succeeded in paving little common ground with Libya before 2011. The multilateral consultation and dialogue that are helping Libya emerge out of the chaos will create a momentous opportunity for the Libyan new political actors to re-examine what Libya’s national interests are in a broader sense, in particular based on the 21st century’s “new security concept,”[[79]](#footnote-80) where it lies in the increasingly intricate global interdependent networks, and how they could avail the Belt and Road Initiative of maximizing their national interests. The Sino-Libyan relations are promising in the future only if both sides are able to diversify cooperation avenues, in particular in the light of the Belt and Road Initiative, and this requires substantial patience, since both countries are inevitably in the adaptive learning process to integrate into the international community, both politically and economically.

In terms of demographic influx, similar with the migrant community shaped before 2011, the Chinese SOEs will be the backbone of the new Chinese presence in Libya. In the light of the Belt and Road Initiative, joint venture possibilities between Libyan and Chinese entrepreneurs will be greatly promoted. However, this increasingly frequent contact on a civilian level should not be considered as an immediate harbinger for the emergence of a diverse Chinese community on the Libyan ground in a short term.

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