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# Reviving China's global footprint along the Silk Roads and the 'Belt and Road Initiative': Chinese overseas industrial park in Egypt

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## ABSTRACT

As the main East-West trade routes in ancient history, the Silk Roads significantly influenced Chinese relations with Egypt, an important country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Informed by the history of the Silk Roads, we articulate China's role in global business history with a focus on identifying key characteristics that underpinned ancient Chinese relations with Egypt. By juxtaposing co-evolution and institutional perspectives as the theoretical framework, our empirical setting comprises the introduction and development of a Chinese overseas industrial park in Egypt. Our findings reveal the salience of the key characteristics with new manifestations associated with Chinese overseas business activity. This study illustrates the impact of co-evolution with institutions on Chinese industrial park development, while reviving China's global footprint in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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## KEYWORDS

Institution; co-evolution; industrial park; China; Egypt; Belt and Road Initiative; Silk Road

## 1. Introduction

In recent history, China's rise, international involvement and business engagement in the Global South have drawn significant attention from scholars, business practitioners and policymakers around the world (Murphy, 2022). Despite de-globalisation and decoupling that emerged as a lucrative narrative describing the on-going global complexity and geopolitical tensions (Witt et al., 2023), China's Belt and Road Initiative continues and extends the legacy of the Silk Road, the main, historic East-West trade route (Lewin & Witt, 2022). Given that ancient China was one of the first countries in the world to engage with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Godley & Shechter, 2008), covering a wide spectrum

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of international trade activity along the Silk Road, business history can play an important role in understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative and globalising endeavours.

However, Chinese business history has received limited attention in the extant mainstream business history literature (Frost & Frost, 2021). Although business history is now global history with the global spread of coverage in advanced economies, emerging markets and less-developing regions (Jones & Zeitlin, 2008), the quest for alternative business history to capture the historical contexts and nuances of emerging markets grows speedily with urgency (Austin et al., 2017). Anchored in the Silk Road, which significantly influenced the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in history, China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative in Africa and the Middle East is reshaping the development of the region and the rest of the world (Blanchard, 2021).

Historical institutional changes and interventions, such as the introduction of new transportation systems, have impacted business activities in the MENA region in important ways (Pereira & Malik, 2015, 2018). Institutional perspectives contributed to the development of business history research, especially with regard to institutional change process (Decker et al., 2018; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004). Despite the growing interest in MENA and its interaction with the world, especially China's rising role in this region, the existing studies largely focus on the macro-level observations and geopolitical analysis from an international relations perspective (Blanchard, 2021). Thus, it remains an important gap to enhance the macro-level understandings of Chinese relations with MENA by examining the organisational-level phenomenon. We argue that juxtaposing the theoretical insights from institutional perspectives and co-evolution may provide an overarching theoretical lens to comprehend China's (re) emergence in global business history and its business engagement in the MENA region.

One important institutional change and intervention event is the introduction and development of overseas industrial parks. Therefore, our research setting comprises Chinese overseas industrial park development in Egypt, an important country in the MENA region due to its strategic location and historical relations with China. Our research question is how can Chinese industrial park co-evolve with the institutional environment in Egypt? Informed by the historical evidence of the Silk Road, we focus on identifying key characteristics that underpinned ancient Chinese relations with Egypt, namely connectivity, fluidity and complementarity. The Chinese overseas industrial park in Egypt, China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (or TEDA SETZ) serves as a representative case of Chinese overseas industrial park development. In the context of reviving China's global footprint through the Belt and Road Initiative, it also provides a reference point to understand the dynamics of China's globalisation endeavours by sharing experience, expertise and competence. Our methodological choice adopted the pluralist approach in business history research (Decker et al., 2015) by combining standard case study analysis (Yin, 2013) with oral history method (Sommer & Quinlan, 2009). We collected primary data surrounding the TEDA SETZ case through interviews and oral history narratives, and secondary data from research archives, historic data and public available information.

We make three contributions to business history and Chinese engagement in MENA research. First, we identified three key characteristics, namely connectivity, fluidity and complementarity, that underpin the dynamics of the historic Chinese–Egyptian relations alongside the development of the Silk Roads. Second, we reinterpreted Chinese relations with Egypt through the lens of those key characteristics in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, which revealed that the three characteristics manifest new meanings in the case

of Chinese overseas industrial park development in Egypt, indicating continuity, historic legacy and enduring relevance to modern business history. Third, our research contributes to the literature on co-evolution with institutions by highlighting the dynamics and contested nature of overseas industrial park development involving focal organisation transformation and institutional influence.

This paper is organised as follows. We first review the literature background that constitutes the building blocks of our theoretical argument and history informed analysis. We then present our research methodology and findings. We conclude by discussing the theoretical, managerial and policy implications and by suggesting future research directions.

## 2. Literature background

### *2.1. The (re)emergence of China's role in global business history and institutional perspectives*

With over three thousand years of history, China was one of the first countries in the world to engage with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, covering a broad range of business activities along the Silk Road trade route (Godley & Shechter, 2008). As acknowledged by prominent business history scholars, business history is now global history with worldwide coverage of advanced economies, emerging markets and less-developed regions (Jones & Zeitlin, 2008). Reflecting upon historical lessons resonates with modern remembrance and contemporary implications, such as the Belt and Road Initiative being perceived as a new twenty-first century Silk Road in reviving China's global footprint.

Earlier studies explored the type and shape of business activity in the context of Chinese business history. For example, collective financing behaviours among Chinese entrepreneurs and retail department stores highlight the important role of informal social networks affecting entrepreneurial activity in Chinese history (Godley & Hang, 2016). These networks contribute to the vibrant development of the private entrepreneurial sector in modern China, while formal institutions are still in the making (Nee & Opper, 2012). In a similar vein, the emergence of the private entrepreneur in China's reform era can be perceived as the rebirth of an earlier tradition rooted in Chinese history (Atherton & Newman, 2016). Despite the importance to understand global history, the extant mainstream business history literature has only given limited attention to Chinese business history (Frost & Frost, 2021).

The historic legacy influenced the (re)emergence of China's standing in global business history. For instance, business history in modern China demonstrates its continuity and sustained influence in time and space (Zelin, 2005). More recently, China's rise, international involvement and business engagement in the Global South have increasingly drawn significant attention from scholars, business practitioners and policymakers around the world (Murphy, 2022). As acknowledged, the role of China in MENA goes beyond economic interests, with implications for international relations, geopolitical and geoeconomic outlooks, and social-cultural engagement (Sidlo, 2020).

International relations studies largely focus on macro-level phenomena and global trends (Blanchard, 2021). Similarly, due to the limited data available, existing scholarship on China's business engagement in MENA tends to be macro-oriented, without micro-level insights gained on the organisational level (Jackson, 2014; Xing et al., 2016). We argue that examining

organisational-level phenomena may significantly enrich the macro-level understandings. Therefore, we bolster an eclectic approach by juxtaposing the theoretical insights from institutional perspectives and co-evolution.

Institutional perspectives have played an important role for both historians and scholars of business studies to understand business and society in time and space from diverse theoretical orientations (Decker et al., 2018). As a complex organisational and societal phenomenon, institutional change involves multiple organisational actors over a long, extended period. For instance, institutional entrepreneurship can play an important role in championing, directing and marshalling the institutional change process (Decker et al., 2018). Furthermore, institutional logic in conjunction with business history perspectives can be conducive to obtaining a more nuanced understanding of the diffusion of global business practices (Casson & da Silva Lopes, 2013). From a business history perspective, another study applied the institutional work lens to investigate the evolution of music record pools in the US (Thompson, 2018). In recognising the important role played by context, business history research is urged to explore how contextual factors can influence institutional change and development (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014).

Therefore, the co-evolution perspective may bring additional insights to understand institutional and organisational change process. Co-evolution underscores the dynamics between organisational actors and institutional environment (Cantwell et al., 2010; Koza & Lewin, 1998). Recent studies in business history used the evolutionary perspective to illuminate institutional and organisational change. For instance, by conceptualising institutions as historically contextualised, one study analysed the co-evolution of legal and organisational change in US savings bank regulations by highlighting the co-evolutionary characteristics (Wadhvani, 2018). Thus, co-evolution in combination with institutional perspectives provides an overarching theoretical lens to comprehend China's (re)emergence in global business history and its participation in the (re)making of the world order from an organisational level. In responding to the call for business history research to pay closer attention to the historical contexts of emerging markets (Austin et al., 2017), this paper aims to explore key characteristics in the ancient history of Silk Roads and their impact on China's modern business history in Egypt, an important country in the MENA region. We choose Egypt as a representative case to illustrate China's engagement in the MENA region along the Silk Road, because countries' rich history and their relations has generated a long and lasting impact in the MENA region from ancient and contemporary history perspectives.

## ***2.2. China–Egypt relations from a historical perspective***

In this section, we provide a brief description and interpretation of Chinese relations with Egypt from a business history perspective in the context of the ancient Silk Road. In 1887, German geology pioneer Ferdinand von Richthofen originally named the transportation link between Western regions and China, Central Asia and India 'the Silk Roads', as they mainly served as the medium for silk-trading activity (von Richthofen, 1877). Maritime Silk Road is the section of the Silk Road that connected Southeast Asia, China, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian peninsula, Somalia, Egypt and Europe *via* oceans and seas. Egypt is one of the main countries that the maritime Silk Road passed through. A multitude of cities were connected through the Silk Roads, as shown in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1.** Map of cities along the Silk Roads (source: UNESCO Silk Roads Program).

Our purpose was to explore factors and identify key characteristics that contributed to the evolution and dynamics of China–Egypt relations with a focus on business-related activity. After researching historic events, narrative discourse and archival data, we identified three salient characteristics that underpin Chinese relations with Egypt along the Silk Road, namely (1) connectivity, (2) fluidity and (3) complementarity. We will articulate these characteristics by using illustrative data and evidence from business history, mainly anchored in the development of international trade activity and world historic events with global impact.

First, connectivity lays the primitive foundation for the exchange of information and goods, enabled by the physical connection and transportation activity alongside the Silk Road infrastructure of China’s maritime and overland trade routes. It began with the Han Empire, which completed the opening and exploration of the eastern half of the Silk Road. In 138 BC and 119 BC, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty twice dispatched his attendant Zhang Qian to the Western regions (Yang, 2009) to initiate direct exchanges there, as well as with India, Central Asia and West Asia. These routes eventually reached the Mediterranean world, running east and west of the Eurasian continent (Rezakhani, 2010). As a historic event with global impact connecting China and the rest of the world, Zhang Qian’s visits to the Western regions in the second century BC symbolises the official opening of the Silk Roads. Connectivity through the Silk Road planted the seed for official mutual recognition between China and Egypt. As the most important transportation and trade route, the Silk Road had gradually formed for the exchange of goods and people between ancient China and Egypt.

Second, fluidity is another salient factor that characterises the ancient Chinese relations with Egypt. It was mainly reflected in the form of international trade activity between China and Egypt. Facilitated by the possibility of transportation through physical connectivity, the Egyptians took advantage of the southwest monsoon in the Indian Ocean to sail from the



Red Sea coast to the Indian Ocean, thus reaching South Asia. Their international exploration witnessed the fluidity of goods, especially precious and rare Chinese goods that were brought to Egypt. For example, Chinese goods such as silk, lacquer ware, ironware, and glazed pottery were shipped to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, and a considerable part of the goods flowed into Mediterranean countries, such as Egypt (Kim, 2011). From the second century BC to the sixth century AD, through the joint efforts of Egyptians, Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Chinese and other ethnic groups, a number of regional and international corridors were established along the Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road (Blanchard, 2021), which flourished until the fifteenth century AD. For example, Chinese goods started from the capital Chang'an, crossed the Pamirs to the Persian Gulf and arrived in Egypt by land, or they left the Persian Gulf by sea and reached Egypt *via* the Red Sea. Therefore, fluidity characterises the dynamic development of international trade activity between ancient China and Egypt.

Third, complementarity is another salient characteristic of Chinese relations with Egypt. In ancient times, complementarity was primarily determined by the value of the trade activity between China and Egypt, which generated significant benefits for people, business and society in both countries. For instance, in the first century AD, Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt wore gorgeous Chinese silk clothes to attend a banquet, drawing significant attention from the attendees (Schoff, 1912), which indicates that silk was highly valued and favoured by the Egyptian upper class. Furthermore, complementarity was explicated by the exchange of technologies, techniques and tacit know-how in commercial goods, merchandised items, agriculture and manufacturing sectors. Chinese silk weaving, porcelain manufacturing technology, papermaking, compasses, gunpowder and other inventions travelled westward along the Silk Road, while from ancient Egyptian sugar, glaze and medical technology were transmitted eastward. The mutual benefits stemming from complementarity underscored the necessity for Chinese relations with Egypt to flourish. Table 1 lists the historical development of Silk Roads and their implication on China–Egypt relations.

In modern history, international diplomacy activity and global events between China and Egypt also lend support to the three salient characteristics. On 30 May 1956, China and Egypt issued the Joint Statement on the Establishment of Ambassador-Level Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Arab Republic of Egypt. With historical significance and global impact, Egypt became the first Arab and African country to establish diplomatic relations with China (Chaziza, 2021). Their establishment marked the beginning of a new era of diplomacy between China and the Arab world and African countries (Mayer, 2018; Sen, 2014). Since then, China has strengthened relations with Arab and African countries by leveraging connectivity, fluidity and complementarity. Table 2 shows selective historic events that were notable milestones. Hence, China–Egypt relations continued to develop positively for business activity to evolve in modern history.

The introduction of overseas industry parks can be regarded as a historic institutional change and intervention event with consequential impact for local business activity. For example, the introduction of the Chinese Special Economic Zone and industrial parks in African countries fosters regional economic development, business vitality, enterprise development and job creation (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2011). Examining the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park reveals the policy transfer of Chinese overseas industrial parks through two-way interactions between the host and home countries (Liang et al., 2021). As an institutional change and intervention event, however, there lacks a contextualised and nuanced understanding of the overseas industrial park development from a historical

**Table 1.** Historical development of Silk Roads and implication on China–Egypt relation.

Historical period	Key route	China–Egypt relations
Han Dynasty (202–220)	The economic and trade exchanges between China and Egypt can be represented by Chang'an and Alexandria route. The city of Alexandria in ancient Egypt was an economic and political centre.	In early 200 AD, there were as many as 120 merchant ships sailing from Egypt to the Indian Ocean every year. Specialties and commodities were imported into China. Commodities from China, after being transhipped to Egypt, were then resold to countries around the Mediterranean Sea (<Han Shu>, <Hou Han Shu>)
Three Kingdoms, Two Jins, Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589)	The Maritime Silk Road was opened in Han Dynasty, then prospered thereafter. Embarking on the Maritime Silk Road, after Chinese mastered the ability to navigate the monsoon with sail and rudder.	In the fourth and fifth centuries, the silk exports from China to Egypt increased significantly. In the fifth century, silk fabrics woven from Chinese silk were widely used in Egypt. As early as 1450 BC, Egypt had mastered the technology of making glass. China imported glass or glazed products from Egypt.
Sui and Tang Dynasties (581–907)	The Maritime Silk Road has become the main channel for economic and trade exchanges between China and African countries in the Tang Dynasty.	Mid–eighth century, with the strength and prosperity of the Arab Empire, the sea traffic between China and Egypt was very smooth. Merchants loaded commodities from the Egyptian city on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea... then set off from the Red Sea, through the East Sea, and arrived at Jeddah, India, and China. Then they returned to the Red Sea from China carrying musk, agarwood, camphor, cinnamon, and other goods <Kitāb al-Masālik w'al-Mamālik>
Song Dynasty (960–1279)	Both Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt were important cities for foreign trade and had close economic and trade ties with China.	Chinese porcelain in the Song Dynasty spread throughout Egypt and penetrated the interior of Egypt.
Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)	The most prominent manifestation of the relationship between China and Egypt was the frequent economic and trade exchanges. Both land and sea routes were very smooth.	Egyptian businessmen came to China to do business, and even settled in China. For example, there were many Egyptian merchants living in Hangzhou, Quanzhou and other places < Ibn Battuta et Ses Récits et Ses Récits de Voyage vers l'Orient>
Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)	Zheng He's navigation pushed the Maritime Silk Road to an unprecedented historic stage when his fleet made world-famous seven voyages to the West.	The fleet brought Chinese porcelain, lacquerware, silk, tea and other handicrafts and presented them to people in Africa. These items have strengthened the friendship between the Chinese and African peoples. The fleet returned with products from Africa (e.g. giraffe, zebra)



**Table 2.** Historic events indicating notable milestones in China–Egypt relations.

Time	Event
1956	China and Egypt issued a Joint Statement on the Establishment of Ambassador-Level Diplomatic Relations.
2000	The China–Africa Cooperation Forum
2004	The China–Arab States Cooperation Forum
2010	The China–Arab Strategic Partnership
2014	The China–Egypt Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
2015	The China–Africa Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
2016	China–Egypt celebrated 60 years Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations, hosting the first-ever Joint Year of Culture Event
2019	President of Egypt participated in the second ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ International Cooperation Summit in Beijing
2021	China and Egypt signed Joint Agreement on Economic and Technology Cooperation

perspective. By using Chinese modern history of overseas industry parks as the research setting, we explore the manifestations of key characteristics of China–Egypt relations while reviving China’s global footprint in the era of the Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, our research question is: How can the Chinese industrial park co-evolve with the institutional environment in Egypt?

### 3. Research design and data selection

To answer our research question, we adopted the qualitative research methodology (Yin, 2013). In particular, we used the oral history method (Sommer & Quinlan, 2009; Thomson, 2007) with the objective to conduct a historically informed study of the story of an industrial park. Three reasons provide the justification for our choice of the qualitative research method. First, this method may facilitate us to obtain a nuanced and contextualised understanding of overseas industrial park development as a dynamic and social constructed phenomenon (Pratt et al., 2022). Furthermore, our methodological approach also enriches the standard qualitative case study method with a specific history research method. Second, in conducting qualitative research, we subscribe to the pluralism view in business history research (Decker et al., 2015) that the utilisation of diverse qualitative research methods, such as the oral history method, may contribute to developing or extending existing theory, especially when the phenomena are still in their nascent stages. Combining standard qualitative case studies with the oral history method may capture the nuances and complexity of overseas industrial park development through a story of opportunities and challenges. Third, the institution and international relations research domains quest for the application of qualitative research method (Decker et al., 2018) to foster dialogue between the study of history, international relations and organisation theory (Rowlinson et al., 2014). Drawing insights from the cross-fertilisation of international relations and organisational studies may enhance our understanding of business history.

#### 3.1. The case of TEDA as research context

The official name of the TEDA industrial park in Egypt is China–Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, or TEDA SETZ for short. Alongside the Belt and Road Initiative, China began to share lessons learned from their experiences with other developing countries

when building and managing industrial parks. By January 2020, China had established 82 industrial parks in a spectrum of 24 countries through the Belt and Road Initiative. Until the end of 2018, these industrial parks had attracted over 4000 companies located within their geographical coverage with a total investment of USD 36.5 billion. These industrial parks have contributed to the host countries a total of USD 2.4 billion in tax income and created 300 thousand jobs, thus making important contributions to host countries' industrial upgrading and economic development.

TEDA began its initial development in the mid-1980s as a linkage between factory and cities. In the 1990s, TEDA focused on creating synergy by leveraging the co-location of factory and cities. Towards the end of the twentieth century, TEDA had evolved into an integrated developer and operator of the industrial park, providing full services through the co-location of schools, hospitals, business facilities and entertainment facilities, as well as factories and living accommodation. Its demand-oriented development and evolution is a snapshot of the booming development of the industrial parks in China.

TEDA SETZ is located in the golden triangle of Asia, Africa, and Europe. It is geographically near the Suez Canal, and about 2 km from Ain Sokhna Port, the third largest and most modernised port of Egypt. Its location is advantageous for shipping and land transportation, facilitating global market outreach while reducing the logistic costs for enterprises that choose to be located in the TEDA SETZ territory. With ten-years' development, TEDA started to share its experience and lessons learned with other organisations who aspire to develop overseas industrial parks. Thus, TEDA can serve as a representative of the overseas industrial park development projects from China.

### **3.2. Data selection**

Our data selection process included both primary data and secondary archival data of the TEDA industrial park in Egypt and China–Egypt relations. First, we adopted the purposeful sampling technique to collect the primary data (Pratt, 2009). The data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with governmental officials and managers who were involved with developing and managing the TEDA industrial park, and with entrepreneurs and business people who actively engaged in commercial activity in Egypt.

Access to the data sample was through the authors' personal and professional networks, and we followed a snowballing approach to contact interviewees because managers and practitioners recommended by trusted referees are more likely to participate in research projects. In order to understand the meanings and process of TEDA industrial park development and its relation to the China–Egypt international contexts and institutional environment, we employed the oral history method (Sommer & Quinlan, 2009) to encourage our informants to report and reflect on real life stories pertaining to our focal research interests. Each interview lasted for 60–120 min in English and Chinese languages, depending on which language the informant preferred. In total, we conducted 28 in-depth interviews, which yielded a rich dataset that enabled us to triangulate the information from different informant perspectives and to perform analysis to generate theoretical insights. We performed a content analysis of the interview transcripts to ensure validity in our data analysis. An overview of the informant is shown in [Table 3](#).

Our secondary data were collected from historical archives; publicly available resources; industrial park reports; national and international news, such as Xinhua News, Today

**Table 3.** Primary interviewees.

Informants	Number of interviews	Roles and positions
TEDA SETZ		Senior advisor, deputy managing director, vice director (2), operation director,
- Senior managers	6	TEDA Academy director, project manager, senior project manager (2), client manager
- Middle managers	4	
Government officials		Former ambassador, commercial counsellor, commercial section head, commercial section officer (2),
- Embassy in Egypt	6	cultural section officer, institute director, trade advisor, Egypt Country Director in the
- Trade and investment agency	4	Department of West Asia and Africa at Ministry of Commerce, consultant
Business people		
- Industry associations	4	Chairman of Chamber of Commerce, former advisor of Investment Bureau, think-tank founder,
- Entrepreneurs/ managers	4	owner-manager, founder CEO, managing director, investment director

China, China Daily, Businesswire; State Council Information Office of P.R. China; TEDA Egypt website; TEDA overseas mode study report (2017) and the Report on Low Carbon and Environmental Assessment for China Built Industry Parks BRI Countries (2020). We also refer to the digital archive of the UNESCO Silk Roads Program, which was launched by the World Heritage Centre in July 2020 to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the Silk Roads Project.

## 4. Examining the TEDA industrial park in Egypt

### 4.1. A business history and developmental perspective on TEDA in Egypt

In this section, we will first provide a business history account of TEDA in Egypt by tracing its development and critical events over the period of ten years. Our analysis reveals three different stages with focused orientation and contested tensions within the institutional environment. From a temporal perspective, its development includes: (1) initiating stage (2008–2009), (2) navigating stage (2010–2014), and (3) institutionalising stage (2015–2018). Along the developmental trajectory, the key characteristics identified in ancient China–Egypt relations during the Silk Road, namely connectivity, fluidity and complementarity, are salient with new manifestations influencing Chinese business activity in Egypt in modern history.

During the initiating stage, connectivity has been the main driver for launching the TEDA SETZ project in 2008. One former commercial section head in Chinese Embassy in Egypt, explained,

In the Silk Road and maritime Silk Road, Egypt played an important role in connecting China with the Arab world and the Middle East. Largely due to its strategic position, Egypt is connected to the Arabic world, the Mediterranean, and Africa. Its geopolitical location determines the choice of TEDA SETZ project.

This narrative was reinforced by the Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Finance in China which decided to grant TEDA as a national-level overseas industrial park in May 2009, signalling the importance of connectivity. Similar to starting a new project, the initial exchange of information and interaction is important to build mutual trust and confidence. Trust building is critical in determining the direction amid highs and lows and numerous tensions along the way in the overseas institutional environment. It took 15 months from the launch of the project until the signing of the initial framework agreement.

One important factor considered in the initial stage is TEDA's competence and capability in building and managing industrial parks. The Vice Director of TEDA Africa, explained,

TEDA has accumulated vast experience in planning, scheduling, organizing, and managing the projects. As a standard process for industrial park development, TEDA can leverage project planning and management experiences accumulated in China.

This narrative highlights the complementarity of capability and competence, manifested in initiating the TEDA SETZ project, which reflects that the meaning of complementarity between China and Egypt has evolved with an industrialisation connotation. Furthermore, the TEDA SETZ project was financed by China Africa Development Fund, indicating the fluidity of resource and financial capital for materialising this infrastructure project. Consequently, the TEDA SETZ project also lays the infrastructure foundation by providing connectivity among Chinese companies and their Egyptian counterparts to explore opportunities for collaboration and cooperation.

During the navigating stage, connectivity became further elaborated, especially the official landmark launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative. In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the strategic proposition of reactivating and rebuilding a 'New Silk Road Economic Belt'. The Belt and Road Initiative rekindled the historic partnerships among countries and cities along the Silk Roads. For instance, in 2014 the 'Silk Roads: Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor' was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as the first transnational project, which was jointly proposed by China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Such recognition infuses Silk Roads with new meanings embedded in history, while highlighting the role of connectivity for the world and globalisation.

Fluidity became more active amid the flows of people, projects and companies from China to Egypt. A former ambassador to Egypt shared

Chinese companies set up some industrial investment in Egypt. In addition to meeting the needs of the Egyptian market, they may also sell their products to the Middle East. Our Chinese enterprises and investors can rely on Egypt as a platform here to reach out to the neighbouring markets. It can therefore produce amplifying effects on the surrounding areas.

This narrative reveals that fluidity goes beyond financial capital and includes projects and companies established in Egypt. The TEDA SETZ project belongs to the rising phenomenon of Chinese overseas FDI in both advanced and less developed countries (Liu & Vrontis, 2017; Xing et al., 2016). During China's overseas adventures and globalising endeavours, fluidity relates to the exchange of ideas and cultural resources, as manifested in the negotiation stage of the TEDA SETZ project. One senior project manager said,

There were 24 rounds of official negotiations till March 2012. From March 2012 to December 2013 the main contract was signed and stamp sealed. In addition to the main contract, there was an appendix that was agreed and signed by both parties till September 2014. The long

period of negotiation and contract signing process is due to several major diverging views, even contradicting standpoints. These areas include the understanding of the 45-year land use rights, pricing of energy supply, and the requirement of chartered right for providing services. For moving the project ahead by resolving the diverging views and obstacles, it is crucial to stick to the guiding principle of 'Striving for the common ground, while respecting the differences'.

This narrative reflects the importance of fluidity, flexibility and mutual understanding of cooperating partners in the lengthy negotiation process. The process was painstaking with both parties committing effort and energy. It also reflects the contested nature of navigating through the complexity when China and African countries possess distinctive cultural and institutional legacies. The differences may drive the diverging views and struggles in comprehending the counterparts' standpoint and aspirations. Our analysis resonates with early observations regarding China's engagement with African people and organisations (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2011; Xing et al., 2016). It is not a linear but a zigzag progression that is associated with setbacks, failures and multiple trial-and-error attempts as evidenced by the lengthy challenge of 24 rounds of official negotiations. Notwithstanding, the numerous informal communications and exchanges are embedded with the cultural preferences and legacies in China and African countries (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2011). The outcome of the TEDA SETZ negotiations relies on both parties' active engagement with trust, respect and fluidity of ideas and understandings.

During the institutionalising stage, complementarity is an important factor determining the construction of the TEDA SETZ project and the land transfer after construction is completed in Egypt. The Egypt country director in the Department of West Asia and Africa at the Ministry of Commerce shared his view,

In the Vision 2030, launched by Egypt in 2016, it can be seen very clearly the aspiration and goal. Egypt is aiming to turn itself into a manufacturing hub of the Arab world, and the policy direction is very clear. Its goal is that by 2030 Egypt's economy can enter the world top 30, by leveraging the power of manufacturing. I think Chinese enterprises can play an important role in this field and support Egypt to build the manufacturing hub for the Arab world.

This narrative underscores the complementarity of competence and capability between China and Egypt in enabling Egypt's Vision 2030. In February 2016, the Egyptian government issued its long-term plan: 'Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt's Vision 2030 and Planning Reform'. China has accumulated significant industry experience and expertise in manufacturing-related sectors as the global manufacturing hub. The TEDA SETZ project attests to Chinese companies' capability in building the overseas industrial park. Companies entering the TEDA SETZ comprise manufacturing, services and business support firms. The activation of complementarity relies on learning and capacity building for economic purposes.

Connectivity has also been manifested from the amplifying effect of the TEDA experience. TEDA has deeply reflected on and documented its learning experience from the TEDA SETZ project. This rare and valuable knowledge has been internalised as its own competitive advantage in developing overseas industrial parks. Several milestone events facilitated the institutionalisation of knowledge, experience and best practices from TEDA SETZ. Notably, in November 2017, TEDA SETZ was included in the second volume of Xi Jinping's *Governance of China*, published in both English and Chinese. In March 2018, during the 13th National People's

Congress in China, TEDA SETZ was recommended by the Ministry of Commerce of China as the successful template for overseas economic and trade cooperation. In April 2018, an event at the Chinese embassy in Egypt celebrated the success of TEDA SETZ as a role model for overseas industrial park development and international cooperation. Table 4 shows the critical events enabling the development of the TEDA SETZ project. Table 5 exhibits the key characteristics of China–Egypt relations and their implications in ancient time and modern history.

Based on our analysis, we propose a conceptual framework consisting of connectivity, fluidity and complementarity. At the core of this triangular framework, connectivity is the central component enabling the exchange of goods, services and people between China and Egypt in the past, present and future. With the continued exchange between the two partners in ancient and contemporary history, fluidity is represented by the vibrant and growing flows of goods, services, capital and people, indicating the evolving China–Egypt relations. From the strategic perspective, complementarity drives and shapes the manifestations of connectivity and fluidity over time. The three components support and reinforce

**Table 4.** Critical events of TEDA SETZ development from a temporal perspective.

Time	Event	Phase
2008	TEDA cooperated with China Africa Development Fund to launch TEDA-Africa, responsible for investing, building, and operating the overseas industrial park in Egypt.	Initiating
May 2009	The Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Finance in China granted TEDA as national-level overseas industrial park.	Initiating
July 2009	The initial framework agreement was signed between TEDA and Egypt with the start of official negotiation process.	Initiating
November 2009	Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo and revealed the official launch of TEDA SETZ project.	Initiating
March 2012	Official negotiation process was accomplished.	Navigating
April 2013	Egyptian Premier witnessed the signing ceremony of the main contract.	Navigating
September 2014	The Appendix to the main contract was agreed and signed by both parties.	Navigating
December 2014	Chines government and Egypt government signed the Joint Declaration of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Egypt.	Navigating
January 2016	President Xi Jinping and his counterpart in Egypt attended the official launching plaque of TEDA SETZ project.	Institutionalising
April 2017	The Management Committee of TEDA SETZ was formally launched.	Institutionalising
July 2017	China-Egypt government-level coordination committee of TEDA SETZ was officially formed with the first meeting being held.	Institutionalising
March 2018	At the thirteenth Chinese National People's Congress, TEDA SETZ was recommend by the Ministry of Commerce of China as the successful template for overseas economic and trade cooperation.	Institutionalising
April 2018	Chinese embassy in Egypt celebrated the success of TEDA SETZ as a role model for overseas industrial park development and international cooperation.	Institutionalising
April 2019	Chinese Ministry of Commerce designated TEDA SETZ as the first cohort of upgrading overseas industrial parks to promote collaboration between domestic parks and overseas ones for economic dual circulation with improved business environment.	Institutionalising
May 2019	Egyptian government granted special approval to TEDA SETZ as the first foreign company to carry out international bonded trade and entrepot trade in Egypt.	Institutionalising
December 2020	TEDA SETZ was officially approved by the General Administration of Egyptian Customs, allowing the TEDA-Royal Bonded Warehouse to engage in cargo storage and other businesses.	Institutionalising



**Table 5.** The key characteristics of China-Egypt relations and implications.

Key characteristics	Ancient Silk Roads	TEDA SETZ
Connectivity	Exchange of information and goods Official mutual recognition between China and Egypt	Egypt's strategic location, connecting to the Arab world, the Mediterranean, and Africa Amplifying effect of TEDA experience with the Belt and Road Initiative
Fluidity	International trade between China and Egypt Crossed the Pamirs to the Persian Gulf to reach Egypt by land. Sailed across the Persian Gulf and reached Egypt <i>via</i> the Red Sea.	Flows of people, projects and companies from China to Egypt Financial capital and investment Exchange of ideas and cultural resources
Complementarity	Value in exchange through international trade Benefits for people, business and society	Competence and capability related to industrial parks China's development model

each other in the context of this study. This triangular framework can be used in future research endeavours, shedding new light on the nuanced meanings and reinterpretations of its constitutive components over time and space during the focal period of history.

#### **4.2. Co-evolution of TEDA with the institutional environment**

In this section, we will illustrate the dynamics and co-evolution of TEDA with the institutional environment. The historical evidence reveals a story of opportunities and challenges, continuous struggles, contestations and searching for solutions encountered by TEDA while exploiting and exploring the TEDA SETZ project. During the initiating and navigating stages, TEDA intended to exploit its accumulated expertise and legacy by exporting the model of Chinese industrial park development as park developer and operator directly. The model had been developed, rectified and implemented in China by TEDA with extensive and successful experience. The company was responsible for developing and building the industrial park, attracting enterprises, and operating major functional tasks. However, TEDA encountered difficulties and significant challenges while replicating the Chinese model of industrial park development in an overseas territory. The operation director reported,

One major challenge is the understanding and interpretation of law and regulations. According to our experience from industrial park development practice in China, the usage and ownership right of both the land and the buildings on the land need to be granted to developers/investors. This means that developers/investors can transfer further to others at their own discretion. However, '45-year land use rights' in Egypt contradicts this practice in China. It means that after 45 years of usage, developers/investors need to transfer the right back to the economic cooperation entity freely without any additional charges.

This narrative indicates the diverging views towards 45-year land use rights in the navigating stage. The mismatch in the understanding of cultural and institutional legacies and attempted replication of the existing model has puzzled and complicated the negotiation process. It requires TEDA to compromise in order to respect the local values in understanding and interpreting the rules and practices. Essentially, the industrial park development model in China is guided by the Chinese government, while the overseas one should conform to the market logic, which differs significantly from the state logic (Xing et al., 2020). It has been a painful undertaking that requires making compromises, even sacrifices, re-adjusting organisational

goals and embracing the open mindset that is flexible and adaptable to local situations in order to search for pragmatic and effective solutions to the attentive problem while striving for common and shared interests. After iteratively experimenting and back-and-forth attempts, TEDA eventually overcame this major challenge by exploring and adapting to local contexts, while it co-evolved with the institution to develop the alternative model of overseas industrial park development. In essence, it is not practical to export the exact model to African countries but requires adaptation and evolutionary innovation, echoed in the case of building and emulating the 'Shenzhen Free Economic Zone' in Africa (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2011).

Furthermore, TEDA co-evolved with the institutional environment by establishing a new talent management system. One crisis that triggered this as both an opportunity and challenge was the large number of resignations from both middle-level Chinese managers and local Egyptian employees in 2013. The main reasons were attributed to Chinese employees' long-term absence from home and family and their homesickness as a consequence. Furthermore, Egyptian employees found it challenging to adapt to the working standards, expectations and tempo of Chinese companies (Xing et al., 2016). The director of TEDA Academy shared,

We must proactively act and design the localization of talent strategy, and build the talent ladder for succession. In October 2016, TEDA Academy was founded with the remit to sustainably train, coach and prepare the pipeline of talent for TEDA. TEDA Overseas Institute in Egypt was tasked with the objective to study, document, internalize and institutionalize new insights, novel methods and lessons learned from operating and managing the overseas industrial park in Egypt.

This narrative reveals TEDA co-evolved with the institutional environment by exploring a new way of talent management while managing expectations of its own and stakeholders. The emergence of developing the alternative model of a talent management system was triggered by the operational crisis. It indicates the unpredictability and uncertainty of overseas operations, especially when the cultural and institutional environments between home country and the host one bears distinctive legacies and characteristics. Without the sense for urgency and adaptive changes, it may lead to TEDA's decline in Egypt. The outcome of establishing the TEDA Academy was evidenced by creating over 3500 job opportunities for Egypt, whereas 90% of the workforce are local employees and 80% of middle-level managers are locally recruited. The TEDA SETZ project not only fulfilled its own demand for talent but also prepared a qualified pool of talent with expertise and experience in managing industrial parks for Egypt. Such a co-evolutionary approach may also assist Chinese globalising endeavour in cultivating talent and human capital supply as one of the most pressing challenges for overseas operations of emerging market multinationals (Liu & Meyer, 2020).

Notably, TEDA co-evolved with the institutional environment by shifting away from the conventional operational model to a new one that suits the local contexts. In return, it fostered the reinvention of TEDA's own business model for future business engagement with other industrial park development projects. One vice director of TEDA Egypt explained,

From 2008 to 2013, TEAD positioned itself as the developer and operator of the industrial park. In our initial overseas endeavours, we followed the same logic by focusing on the development, construction and operation of the industrial park. This heavy-asset approach requires not only a large lump sum of investment, but also necessitates the dedicated efforts to attract good companies to locate in the industrial parks. In 2014, after long-term exploration and reflection,

we decided to reposition TEDA as the developer of a modern industrial city, an asset-light approach, by leveraging the industrial park as a platform for business and industrial activities, covering manufacturing, logistics, modern services and real estate development as an integrated solution to constructing the modern industrial city.

This narrative suggests that the TEDA SETZ project has facilitated the emergence of a new industrial park development model for TEDA even though the process in achieving this status entailed lengthy exploration and experimentation with setbacks, failed attempts, and contested struggles. Reflection upon opportunities and challenges as well as continuous self-reflection on success and failure is a must-have attribute for organising overseas. The core innovation of this new positioning, distinctive from the original one, is the connectivity among companies and stakeholders alongside the supply chains and industrial value chains.

One important globalisation context accelerating the TEDA's business model transformation from the asset-heavy one to an asset-light one is China's Belt and Road Initiative (Leandro & Duarte, 2020). One core pathway to fostering the Belt and Road Initiative is international trade, infrastructural projects and economic cooperation among the countries alongside the Belt and Road route, or the new Silk Roads, between China and the rest of the world (Lewin & Witt, 2022). The TEDA SETZ project has pioneered the model of exporting industrial experience and manufacturing competence from China to countries in the African continent through large-scale collaboration and industrial development projects. One senior project manager shared

TEDA has been invited by several Chinese companies, including financial institutions and industrial park developers, to provide consultancy and advice for potential overseas industrial park projects. For example, in 2015 we were invited by China Road & Bridge Corporation to consult the Mombasa Port Free Trade Zone project in Kenya to provide feasibility analysis, strategy consultation, industrial planning and policy recommendations. In 2016, China Merchants Group invited TEDA to provide whole industrial chain evaluation for the Djibouti [a country in the North Africa] Free Trade Zone project. Also in 2016, TEDA received the invitation from the China-Africa Development Fund to conduct feasibility studies of the Port of Pointe Noire Economic Special Zone in Congo.

This narrative suggests that thanks to the accumulated experience and valuable expertise, TEDA began to transfer knowledge to other Chinese companies that aspire to engage with the Belt and Road Initiative through overseas industrial park development. The opportunity of offering professional services facilitated TEDA to transform itself from an industrial park developer and operator into a service provider. Exporting the overseas industrial development model to other countries relies on TEDA's experience assembled in Egypt with consequential managerial and policy implications in the broader context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

### **5.1. Theoretical contribution**

This study makes three contributions to business history and Chinese engagement in MENA research by (1) identifying key characteristics that ancient China exhibited with Egypt in the age of Silk Roads; (2) reinterpreting Chinese relations with Egypt through the lens of the identified key characteristics in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative; and

(3) illustrating the co-evolution of Chinese overseas industrial park development with the institutional environment in Egypt. First, our study reveals three key characteristics as driving forces that underpin the historical dynamics of Chinese relations with Egypt against the background of the Silk Roads. The important prevalence of Chinese business history in predicting economic and business activity (Atherton & Newman, 2016; Godley & Hang, 2016), and the rather less historical understanding of emerging economies in the extant business history literature (Austin et al., 2017) necessitates a business history investigation to identify the key characteristics of Chinese relations with the MENA region. By tracing the original initiation of the Silk Roads from the Han Dynasty and their historical evolution during the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, our study illustrates the dynamic development of the Silk Roads as the main trade routes between the East and the West, and highlights their importance for Chinese relations with the MENA region, using Egypt as an example.

Three key characteristics were identified to describe relations between ancient China and Egypt, namely connectivity, fluidity and complementarity. With international trade activity as the focus, connectivity, through physical connection and transportation, enabled the exchange of information and goods along the Silk Roads, including ancient maritime and overland trade routes, between China and the rest of the world. Fluidity is largely manifested in the form of international trade activity between China and Egypt, facilitated by the possibility of transportation through physical connectivity. Complementarity is reflected in the value in exchange through international trade activity between ancient China and Egypt, generating benefits for people and society in both countries. In so doing, our research contributes to obtaining a nuanced and contextualised understanding of reframing Chinese business history (Frost & Frost, 2021).

Second, our study contributes to the China and MENA literature by reinterpreting Chinese relations with Egypt through the lens of the identified key characteristics in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Connectivity is the main driver for launching the China-Egypt TEDA SETZ project, given Egypt's strategic location and important positioning that connects the Arab world, Africa and Mediterranean regions. Fluidity was manifested with the flows of people, projects and companies from China to Egypt amid the Chinese globalisation endeavours (Wang et al., 2022), and especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (Lewin & Witt, 2022). Complementarity of capability and competence between China and Egypt became salient, facilitating the implementation of the Egypt's Vision 2030 with its aspiration to serve as the manufacturing hub for the Arab world. These three characteristics manifest themselves with new meanings in the case of Chinese overseas industrial park development in Egypt, indicating the continuity, historical legacy and the enduring relevance on modern business history. Furthermore, despite the growing interest in the importance of MENA and its interaction with China in business activity amid the new era of globalisation, our study complements the existing body of knowledge that mainly focused on international relations and macro-level geopolitical analysis (Blanchard, 2021) by providing a nuanced and contextualised understanding of organisational level dynamics in Egypt. Additionally, viewing the introduction of overseas industry parks as a historical institutional change and intervention event, our study lends support to the nascent literature on the introduction of Chinese special economic zones and industrial parks in African countries (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2011) by highlighting the enduring impact of (business) history.

The tensions among the global–regional duality, organisational orientation and institutional environment affects the developmental trajectory of the Chinese overseas industrial park in Egypt. By adopting a history-informed approach, our findings offer additional insights into Chinese business engagement and activity in the MENA region. A modern historical account of the industry park development in Egypt provides a reference point to understand how Chinese global business, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, can be influenced by history.

Third, our research contributes to the co-evolution with institution research by showing the dynamics of overseas industrial park development with institutional environment. By juxtaposing co-evolution and business history research (Wadhvani, 2018), our study extends the recent discussion on co-evolution with institutions by articulating the important role of contextual factors in shaping the management practices in global business history settings (Casson & da Silva Lopes, 2013). By identifying critical events informed with evidence from oral histories, our findings reveal the dynamic development of a Chinese overseas industry park in Egypt by strengthening the role of institutional environment. As acknowledged, historical institutional changes and interventions, such as the introduction of new transportation systems, have impacted business activities in the MENA region in important ways (Pereira & Malik, 2015, 2018). Viewing the overseas industrial park as a glocal mediator in Egypt (Shechter, 2008) that connects business and diverse organisational actors in both China and Egypt, this particular institutional change and intervention event can enable resource mobilisation, information exchange, capacity building and international trade with important impacts on local business activity and global business history.

The existing research on institutional change largely focused on the organisational level (Decker et al., 2018), yet failed to uncover the interactions and dynamics of the factors involved. Thus, our results highlight the dynamics and contested nature of overseas industrial park development involving the focal organisation, stakeholders and institutional environment. Furthermore, our findings suggest cross-level interaction as an effective means for overseas organisations to navigate through complexity by engaging with high-level politicians in both countries (Chaziza, 2021; Mayer, 2018). The collective interaction can influence the processes and approaches in dealing with challenging situations. This finding lends further support to understanding the tensions in the formation, exploration and transformation of the industrial park development model as it co-evolves with the institutional environment. In doing so, our study contributes to this literature by providing a more nuanced and dynamic perspective of the processes and consequences of such interventions in the context of the Chinese new Silk Road in Egypt.

## **5.2. Managerial and policy implications**

This study has several implications for industrial park developers, operators, and policymakers at both national and regional levels. First, industrial park developers should pay close attention to business history, institutional environment and their influence in the pursuit of an overseas project development. Overseas business endeavours face cultural and institutional differences and unavoidable difficulties and challenges throughout their development journeys. In addition, business operations in less developed countries require organisations to act and engage wisely in environments of great risk and high uncertainty (Casson & da Silva Lopes, 2013). Dealing with difficult situations effectively necessitates the deliberate efforts by a focal organisation to negotiate and navigate through complexity with flexibility and agility (Christofi et al.,

2021). Through the process of building and development over time, a focal organisation may draw valuable resources and lessons learned from different engagement in the broader institutional contexts. Especially, overseas organisations might resort to the interplay of international contexts and institutional environments as a resource base. Our research highlights that the internationalisation of industrial parks resonates with the globalisation trend, their historical legacy and contemporary characteristics. When attempting to export an extant model, it should adapt to the local conditions by co-evolving with institutions.

As for policy implications, governments around the globe tend to resort to industrial development and innovation for regional economic development and growth, which is especially an important policy option in emerging economies (Liu & Huang, 2018). Brookings Doha Centre's report highlighted China's growing footprint in North Africa in particular (Ghafar & Jacobs, 2019). It is argued that China's rise is shaping the world order with important implications for international business, global history and management practices (Grosse et al., 2021). Our research on TEDA SEUZ in Egypt illuminates the importance of government support in overcoming the challenges with overseas business development. The focus on promoting and developing regions should not ignore the impact of the institutional environment and international contexts. History matters in organisation studies (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004), and historical resources can provide clues to tackling the managerial challenges (Decker, 2018). In addition, the transformation from an asset-heavy development model to an asset-light one in industrial park development requires different types of training and education beyond the conventional talent cultivation system, especially in the context of the Industry 4.0 era (Pereira et al., 2023). In solving the talent management challenge encountered by firms in emerging markets, we argue that both industry and government can systematically design and implement policy initiatives to cultivate talent with a global mindset and skillsets, and integrate them into the existing talent management and education programs.

### **5.3. Limitation and future research directions**

Our business history research might generate theoretical generalisability beyond the empirical settings of this present study. There are several fruitful research directions that can build on our initial attempt to investigate through the theoretical lens of co-evolution and institutions. First, our study focuses on Chinese overseas industrial park development in Egypt, and it highlights the contested nature and tensions during the development processes and the co-evolution of the focal organisation with the institutional environment.

Furthermore, we propose a conceptual framework consisting of connectivity, fluidity and complementarity. The three components support and reinforce each other in the context of this study of the evolving China–Egypt relations in ancient and contemporary history. We suggest future work may apply and extend our proposed triangle framework in exploring the new meanings and reinterpretations of its constitutive components in order to generate nuanced insights on China and its evolving relations with the world in global business history. In addition, future work is encouraged to adopt a comparative approach by contrasting industrial parks situated in different geographic locations, especially in emerging economies (Austin et al., 2017). A comparative approach may also facilitate the identification of commonalities and distinctive characteristics of industrial park development across different population samples over time and space in history. In so doing, it may generate an enhanced understanding of the complex interactions between organisations and institutions (Rowlinson et al., 2014).



Second, we suggest the new industrial park development model as a novel organisational development model from the co-evolution with institutions perspective. Other theoretical perspectives and frameworks could be identified to further advance this research stream. For example, the triple helix model is a widely used framework to explain regional innovation and economic development, yet emerging economies' contexts can challenge the assumption and boundary conditions of the established theory (Liu & Huang, 2018). Context is a fundamental concept to understand business history (B. Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004), organisational behaviour (Johns, 2017), management practice and international business (Liu & Vrontis, 2017; Meyer & Peng, 2016). We suggest that taking context seriously may generate important theoretical insights to understand the tensions experienced by overseas operations, especially in less developed countries with dynamics and change as their signature characteristics (Pereira & Malik, 2018).

Third, our investigation revealed that professional services enable TEDA to transform from the asset-heavy model to an asset-light one. In relation to the rise of servitization and advanced services of Chinese manufacturing firms in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (Xing et al., 2017), servitization research may offer some revealing insights into the process of organisational transformation (Bustinza et al., 2022; Xing et al., 2023). In particular, territorial servitization emphasised how services may spark the revitalisation of regional economic activity (Gomes et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). Relatedly, the emerging research stream on digitalisation and HRM practices (Pereira et al., 2023) may offer important insights suited to investigating the new organisational forms and novel approaches in global talent management of emerging market firms in the pursuit of overseas adventures (Liu, 2019). Therefore, future work may extend our theoretical framework of co-evolution with institutions in connection with business history to generate further insights into the role of China in global business history.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

From a business history perspective, our study explored China's role in global business history along the Silk Roads and identified three key characteristics of ancient Chinese relations with Egypt. Equipped with a history-informed understanding, this paper re-interprets these key characteristics by showing their manifestations in Chinese business engagement in Egypt. By using the co-evolution with institution framework, our study explores the complex interplay between organisation and institutional environment in the case of Chinese overseas industrial park development in Egypt. Our business history account offers an attempt to illustrate China's (re)emergence in the MENA region using Egypt as an example in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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