

# Contesting Method and Theory Between Europe and Asia: Asian Studies in Turkey

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## Abstract

This paper presents the content of this thematic issue of *Diogenes* on Asian studies in Turkey. It explains the origins of this set of papers in light of relevant scholarship, relates it to current academic work in the field, and provides a rationale for issuing a volume on Asian scholarship in Turkey.

## Keywords

Asian Studies, Turkey, Method and Theory, Globalization, Human Rights, International Relations, Chinese history, Japanese history, Japanese Language, Japanese Linguistics, Inner Asia, Turks, Cultural Relativism, American academia, Geo-cultural, Chinese Politics, China, Japan

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This special issue on Asian Studies in Turkey ventures to address the challenging question whether the discourse of Asian Studies in Turkey is indicative of the potential for a greater plurality from different geo-cultural locations (in the words of one of the authors of this volume, Altay Atlı) to emerge in social sciences and cultural studies, with a focus on the method and theory of Asian Studies, a domain that so far has been shaped by American academia's dominant discourse. A side question would be whether globalization, a process which usually refers to the economic, financial, and technological integration of the world in full force at least until 2016, has played an effective role in transforming the methodology and conceptualization of Asian Studies as a scholarly field. The following papers are representative of the initial steps taken by scholars in Turkey who have experience in linking their academic formation in Turkey, East Asia, and the West as the formative framework of their research agendas in Asian Studies.

For a Turk, this is the geographic world of unfamiliar Asia that lies beyond the familiar Asia Minor geography of Turkey and its former polity, the Ottoman Empire. Ancient Greek geographers distinguished this gigantic territorial space as Asia Major: it stretches from the east of Ankara, the capital of today's Turkey, to the distant shores of China and India. The authors represent a diversity of fields and interests, ranging from Japanese literature, Chinese, and Japanese history

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to international relations and human rights in China and Turkey. The papers stand out for offering to take the initial steps in questions and themes, and venture to contribute to their respective fields in Asian Studies from the vantage point of research conducted in Turkey. The works represent an originality that is distinct for their own identity as Turkish scholars who operate in a milieu that lies between Europe and Asia, hence, a fertile ground to contest method and theory between Europe and Asia as well. The local background of the contributors helps incorporate a comparative edge from Turkey and carries the potential to broaden the perspective on the concepts used in Asian studies beyond the bilateral dichotomy of a long-standing familiar comparative framework with the West. They offer a more “universal” perspective by introducing a third-party comparative perspective. Whether the authors have been successful in a rising to the challenge of infusing a global plurality into the field of Asian Studies is too early to tell at this initial stage. But each one of the papers contains elements that apply method and theory in Asian Studies from their own different perspectives, this pointing the way towards the development of a richer global plurality of perspectives in Asian Studies.

The papers originally presented in March 2012 at the *Contesting Method and Theory Between Europe and Asia: Perspectives on Asian Studies in Turkey* conference that was held in Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey, have been developed for this special issue. The contributors come from a wide spectrum of fields ranging from medieval history of China to nineteenth century Meiji Japan, Japanese linguistics and literature, and current international relations and politics in China and Asia, as well as an overview of the birth of Asian Studies in Turkey. The scholars represent the “founder” generation and the upcoming younger generation of specialists on Asian studies who are capable of using original sources in Asian languages (Chinese and Japanese), international scholarship in English, and publications in Turkish that provides a unique formation. The participants can be considered as representative of the research interests and questions that have circulated in the Turkish academy. Some emphasize bringing in perspectives from the Turkic communities in Inner Asia to interpret East Asian diplomacy. Others infuse a comparative approach from China, and Turkey, for the discussion of contemporary issues such as International Relations theory or Human Rights from Asia. By now, the numbers of Asia specialist have increased in significant numbers. Thus, it would be feasible to publish a second volume of the special issue of Asian Studies in Turkey that would benefit from a larger pool of researchers who have finished their doctorates and have been publishing on various aspects of Asian Studies. This volume therefore intends to introduce the birth of a new field of Asian Studies in Turkey that lies between Europe and Asia which geographically and culturally has the special position of offering perspectives that question and debate the existing discourse on Asia globally.

The first two papers of Selçuk Esenbel and Ceren Ergenc consider the difficulty in defining the frame of Asian Studies (or for that matter any form of social science) in a country such as Turkey – which is a “middle” ranking power that was incorporated into the larger global community under the leadership of the United States in the Cold War era. Esenbel surveys the relative surge in Asian studies as part of a globalization process that created the new opportunities for international exchange and encounters, with the arrival of new business and economic capital in the form of Japanese and Chinese capital in the developmental projects of Turkey from the mid 1980s. The paper summarizes the state of Asian Studies in the form of pre-war Sinology, a field pioneered in Ankara University and linked to the search for a new universalistic Turkish identity that wanted to discover the origins of the nation in early Chinese sources. The paper then goes on to illustrate the steps through which Asian Studies (particularly on Japan and China) emerged in Turkish universities in the post-Cold War era. The paper uses the case of Bogazici University in Istanbul. In a narrative that draws upon her personal engagement in the field, she explains the role of Bogazici University in the process.

Ergenc provides an astute analysis of the state of Asian Studies prior to this opening up, which reassigned Turkish scholarship to the academic production of the West, and inevitably contextualized Asian studies according to Western interpretations. The article looks at the development and identity crises of regional studies in Turkey and the world. Against this background, the trends and production of knowledge in East Asian studies are examined in (i) the early Republican era, (ii) the Cold War years, and (iii) the era of globalization, and where we are today. The piece proposes a comparative method and the use of “Asia” as a rhetorical tool to rebuild the nation’s collective.

The papers by Isenbike Togan and Aybike Seyma Tezel are examples of expanding the method and theory of Asian Studies, in the case of Chinese history, by incorporating the information and perspective of the Turkic world into the explanation of East Asian and Chinese history. This perspective is an important contribution to the plurality of approaches to that field. Togan takes up the difficult question of how to interpret and translate the tradition of China’s international relations (which are known in the field as ‘tributary relations’ according to the standard Western scholarship on East Asian studies). Togan’s article critically surveys the historiography of tributary relations, a topic that, as a result of Sino-European encounters in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, had a significant presence in Western literature on China. In these studies, tribute is studied from the China angle. Togan provides a critical appraisal of the Western academic historiography of the tribute system that conceptualized the traditional concepts of China’s inter-state relations as that of relations with “tribute paying barbarians”. This study of Chinese practice widens the multiple meaning of the term *gong* (貢) in China’s relations with the Mongols and the nomads of Inner Asia and Manchu. Their use of the term with respect to their relations with neighboring peoples actually differs from the standard application of the “tribute” (*gong* 貢) concept toward foreigners. Togan thus contributes to the historiography on China’s tributary relations by addressing the question not from the angle of the Qing dynasty, but from the perspective of its use by the outside world. Togan shows that when views of the neighboring peoples are taken into consideration, it becomes evident that the smaller states in Inner Asia had not adopted the Chinese notion. Togan’s paper expands upon the comparative method by taking the Chinese tributary experience of a global order of hierarchy among nations in a China-centered tributary order some way beyond a typical binary comparison with Western historical experience that is based upon the notion of a Westphalian system of international relations between equal states. Togan also looks at the practices of the Ottoman empire to show that they too used a strategy similar to China. The paper also suggests the need to examine the practices of the smaller states in their own terms. The paper discusses how this practice was perceived by the neighboring Inner Asian peoples, who preferred to use their own terms such as alms or presents instead of tribute that indicated they did not adhere to the hierarchy in the Chinese terms and evolved their own perception of their relations with this great power. Secondly, the paper examines similar divergence of attitudes in another imperial system, that of the Ottomans whose “tributary relations”, *kharaj*, with foreigners were, in turn, also seen as gifts by foreign visitors to the court. The author argues that large states had their own terminology – *gong* (貢), *kharaj* – showing their own sense of hierarchy. Although the content of these terms supposedly acknowledging the supremacy of the large state did change over time, the terminology remained constant. Small states which employed the strategy of the weak, on the other hand, were flexible in terms of the kinds of terminology they employed. Rather than being keen on one specific term, they could use different words and phrases depending on the region, time, and occasion. Small states also understood the large state strategy and went along with their requirements. Local rulers were resourceful and brought different issues to the forefront. Official visits of the small states to the large states were motivated by competition among themselves, by the customs of observance of the Inner Asian custom of *körünüsh* “audience” (Doerfer, 1975: no. 1723) and of

course by their own needs. The study significantly expands the historical understanding of [China's] historic relations with the outside world beyond the dominant tributary relations terminology.

Next, Tezel looks at the usage of tomb inscriptions as historical materials. Sino-Inner Asian interactions in the seventh century Inner Asia are analyzed on the basis of the decipherment of the Pugu Yitu tomb inscription with cross references made to the relevant official historical accounts of China. The Pugu family is a subgroup of the Turkish-speaking Tiele confederation. Sources on the history of Pugu are limited to the Chinese official histories; however, the Pugu Yitu tomb stone found in Mongolia in 2009 presented further information on the group and helped the researchers correct some important details as well. Yitu's personal history contains certain clues and resemblances with respect to the other Inner Asian generals and officials serving the Chinese governments. In the text, Yitu's loyalty and characteristic features are presented as inherited from his ancestors. Yitu's tombs inscription gives significant evidence on the allied Inner Asian image in China and the relationship established between the two sides in that sense, as well as giving a fine example of the cooptation and integration of members of the non-Chinese elites into the Chinese hierarchy.

The unique example of the Yitu inscription may be generalized into a pattern which has influenced the general characteristics of Chinese policies in Inner Asia for centuries. Chinese civilization, meaning its culture, society, political structure, as well as the northwestern borders of China are mostly affected by the interaction of Chinese society and the people of Central Eurasia. Thus, the frontier is an important concept to be dealt with, when attempting to define the relationship created.

Pursuing the critical discussion of Western historiography on East Asia, Kiraz Perincek Karavit presents Western approaches to Chinese landscape painting at different time periods, basing her comparison on the eleventh century Chinese painter Guo Xi's *Essay on Landscape Painting*. In the first part of the paper, she gives some brief information about the artist and his work. Guo Xi's artistic style (his emphasis on perspective) that is "the three ways of viewing a mountain" is explained. The three ways are the application of color, creation of a mental framework for the viewer, and the cultivation of a healthy relationship between man and his environment. Guo Xi had a significant influence on Chinese art history not simply because his revolutionary ideas signaled the rebirth of landscape painting, showing the intense feeling for hills and rivers and lakes and some of its important techniques, but also because of his thoroughness and mastery in applying his theories. The main argument in the paper is that these articles dealing with Chinese landscape painting give clues about their period's main rhetoric as well as discussions and approaches in the realm of Western art history.

The paper by Erdal Küçükyağın on the Count Otani Kozui Expeditions into Central Asia illuminates a relatively unstudied episode in modern Japanese history. It deals with the Japanese interest along the Silk Road that represents the beginning of Japanese interest in the origins of Buddhism that geographically includes the people and culture of Inner and Central Asia. This is a narrative that unravels the Japanese origins of Turkology in Japan as well as Buddhist studies. Küçükyağın analyzes the principal motivations behind the three Ōtani expeditions which he calls "the first non-Western attempt to carry out systematic research in Central Asia". He shows how they were intended to find the routes through which Buddhism had passed before reaching Japan. This is what makes them unique when compared with the other exploration missions by Westerners. This Japanese exploration of Inner Asia reflected a personal vision that was keen to connect Japanese religious culture to Central Asia. The author proceeds to analyze all three expeditions by looking at the route they took, the people that were part of the expedition, and the discoveries they made, and the artifacts recovered. In the next section he talks about the legacy of the expeditions, and how they were presented to the public, as well as the controversies they caused.

Turning to Japanese Studies, Ali Volkan Erdemir discusses the merits of using the sociology of literature as a method to understand Japanese culture. Erdemir is concerned with making a possible contribution to the work conducted in Japanese language and literature departments in Turkey by using the sociology of literature as a method. The discussion begins with a brief summary of the sociology of literature, merely to make clear the basic characteristics of the method developed by well-known intellectuals. Then the novel *Botchan* of the famous Meiji author Natsume Sōseki is taken as an example for the suggested approach.

He suggests that applying the sociology of literature approach to Japanese education for undergraduate and Master's courses gives the opportunity to the Japanese language learner to form a general opinion on Japanese culture, society and history, as well as literature. At this point, Natsume Sōseki's *Botchan* (1906) can be suggested as a good example. Also, other genres of literature, such as short stories and poems, may be considered as teaching materials. The well-known novel narrates the life story of a young teacher, who was brought up in urban Tokyo, who goes to live in a provincial village and reflects on the contradictions and problems of social transition from traditional Japan to the superficiality of the Western lifestyles during the Meiji period. The novel's protagonist reflects the mental framework of a representative individual from this period of swift changes in nineteenth century Japan that faced identity questions between the East and the West as part of modern life – an issue that still resonates in Japanese society today.

Oğuz Baykara and Ayse Nur Tekmen contribute to Japanese language study by using the method of comparison and translation with Turkish that enriches the comparative framework of Japanese language translation studies and Japanese linguistics. Oğuz Baykara's article immerses itself in the theoretical problems of translation by giving an account of his Turkish translation the classic text of Japanese literature, the Tale of Genji by Lady Murasaki of the eleventh century Heian court in Japan. He explains the methods and strategies he benefited from while doing the translation, relating the issues he encounters to wider debates in the field of literary translation. He also explains and illustrates the problems encountered and the solutions arrived at during the translation. Baykara uses Edward G. Seidensticker's English translation as a primary source, but also utilizes other English versions by Arthur Waley and Royall Tyler, as well as the Japanese classic text of *Genji Monogatari*. Using as method, the comparison of both English versions as well as the Japanese classical text, Baykara discusses translation studies questions in this exercise to construct a third language Turkish translation of the text. He encounters certain "shortcoming and ambiguities" in Seidensticker's version and finds his translation of poems unintelligible in terms of semantic quality. According to Baykara, Arthur Waley's translation is ornate and creative, with modern expressions added to the original story to make it more enjoyable to the English reader, with short tanka poems in *Monogatari* also presented as prose. After presenting these shortcomings and discussing some of the problems (specifically poetry translation, domestication, lexical selection, stylistics, inconsistencies of source texts, and handling of metaphors and puns), some examples are given in each category in the process of a Turkish translation of the text. In the author's words: "In order to produce an efficient translation, it is not enough to know the lexicon and grammar of the source language. To achieve a successful translation, one should not only have an in-depth knowledge of the conventions and symbolic codes of the source literature but also be intensely aware of the literary and cultural dynamics of the target language. Only this knowledge and awareness will lend sonority and *ornatus* to the target text".

In the article on politeness as a cultural aspect in Japanese and Turkish, Ayse Nur Tekmen's aim is to describe the politeness strategy of these two languages from a cultural perspective within the paradigm of Cognitive Linguistics. Turkish and Japanese are agglutinative languages and both language speakers prefer subjective construal. Since the Turkish and Japanese are agglutinative, the construction of word forms are made by suffixes and there are a large number of suffixes to

make verbs from nouns, nouns from verbs, adjectives from nouns etc. Tekmen demonstrates this with examples of verbs like:

TR: Oku-n-a-gel-mek

JP: 読まされ-て-くる-こと

So, the typology of a language might be related to the perception of a language. The conceptualization of ‘polite’ and perception of politeness in language may be similar. Politeness, honorifics, inter-subjectivity, phenomenization are the keywords of her study. According to Tekmen, Japanese is known for its honorifics system, and Turkish also has honorific forms similar to Japanese. In both languages there are humbling verbs (*kenjōgo*), exalting verbs (*sonkeigo*), and honorific forms of nouns. The author also thinks Japanese is a speaker-oriented language. Therefore, it can be argued that, as an ego-centric or speaker-oriented language, ‘being polite’ does not mean being closer or having a distance to the hearer according to his/her willing, additionally, it might include a sense of avoidance of trouble in relationships (including relations between subject person and the speaker). She believes these arguments can also be valid for the Turkish language. She then proceeds to identify “fashions of speaking” in categories of politeness that she calls: the cultural code, inter-subjectivity, phenomenization, intransitive verbs, use of passive voice, and simple present tense as politeness in Turkish.

Altay Atlı and Çağdaş Üngör’s papers look at contemporary Asia in the case of China through a discussion of universal issues such as the Atlı paper on the need for greater plurality in the discipline of international relations and the Üngör paper on the global issue of human rights in Chinese and Turkish regimes. Atlı starts off by arguing for the significance of introducing the concept of change in international relations theory that failed to provide prognosis about future developments because of the static model-oriented character of the field’s methodology and theoretical frame as it developed in the American academy during the Cold War. Atlı points out that the Heraclitan concept of change can be useful for explaining the international system of states. The system is changing all the time; some powers rise, some fall; some achieve rapid progress, some remain behind and as the distribution of power and capabilities among the actors’ changes, so does the system. Everything is in flux. Sometimes the change can be so fast that individuals living within the system can find it hard to keep pace with it. Such is today’s world; it is a world of profound change within which we are witnessing a rapid transformation in basically every aspect of human life. Explaining the “outcome” of the change and the “process” of the change itself are not the same thing. There remains an ontological loophole between the “old” and the “new”. On the other hand, political realism has been and continues to be an important arena for arguments regarding the nature of change. For realists, the pattern of international politics is seen to have remained constant throughout history, as a “recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy” (Gilpin, 1981: 7). For this reason, the realist school of thought, especially its structural branch, argues that continuities in IR are more important than changes, and limits change to such parameters as variations in the balance of power, polarization, and great power politics. In this respect, change is portrayed as the “perpetuation of difference and fragmentation” (Walker, 1987). and the explanation of continuity is prioritized over theorizing on future changes and alternative world orders.

IR theory originating from the US, especially the Cold War realism, has indeed served American purposes and justified US involvement in global affairs. In the United States, as Hoffmann asserted, the policy makers wanted what was offered by scholars, whose research priorities blended with the priorities of the government (Hoffmann, 1994: 222). Theories served to solve the grand problems of the United States with regard to the maintenance of its hegemony in the post-Second World War world order and to justify its actions within this context.

This paper's argument is that this situation has to be reversed and alternative IR theories and approaches have to emerge and reinforce the mainstream so that the discipline can be in a better position to explain international change. The paper argues that change in the international system is the outcome of the actions of several actors. Therefore, in order to be able to explain change, the discipline has to examine the actions as well as interests and identities of all of the actors playing a part in change, not only the most dominant actor; and moreover, the discipline has to give a voice to those actors and listen to what their scholars say, because what matters most is to understand how those actors see themselves, rather than how they are viewed from outside. Atli argues that if IR theories are to be brought into contact with the realities of the region, and if Western theories fail in dealing with the Asia-Pacific region, what we need is national theoretical perspectives from the region, in other words we need an Asian IR.

One important source for Asian IR can be China. This is not only because China is one of the major players in the contemporary international system and has a great influence in shaping the change the system is going through, both due to the favorable position it has attained in the distribution of capabilities among the countries in the world, but also because China has a strong philosophical tradition and a large IR community.

In the non-western world, China is the most obvious candidate for an "independent IR tradition" building on a unique philosophical tradition, however very little theorizing (independent from the Western mainstream) has taken place there so far. The current state of the Chinese IR is rather bleak. However, the discipline needs the Chinese IR community. Without China's contribution, the discipline can still understand China *per se*, that would not be a problem because foreign policy and strategic studies scholars are already producing valuable work on this subject. However, without China's theoretical contribution, the mainstream theories of the discipline would never be able to fully explain the change in the international system where China is one of the leading actors. Today the IR discipline is regarded by many as being "globalized", but not "universalized". This paper puts a case for a more universalized discipline. It is a vital task because our lives are shaped by how the world changes, and without a universalized discipline of IR we cannot predict and explain change in the world. It is not about having an American or Chinese or Turkish perspective on world affairs, but it is about being able to combine them to achieve a universal perspective. Failure to achieve this would not only be an academic disappointment, it also might and actually does have consequences, sometimes fatal ones, for humankind.

Çağdaş Üngör looks at the current global debate on "cultural relativism" concerning the concept of human rights in Turkey and China that brings a global perspective to human rights by showing the way in which the concept is used in the self-representation of regimes that disagreed with the Western definition of human rights. In the Middle East and Asia, certain premises of "human rights" were found incompatible with Islamic and Confucian traditions. "Human rights" became part of the public discourse in China and Turkey since the 1990s – nationalists – both inside and outside the government circles- came to see the new emphasis on "human rights" as a potential threat to the state-centric Westphalian paradigm and its concept of national sovereignty. Especially in countries with domestic social discontent, "human rights" was embraced by dissident groups which sought broader political rights, cultural or territorial autonomy whereas it was rejected by those who favored the status quo. China and Turkey are two important cases in point.

According to the author, in the case of Turkey the discourse was dominated by those who advocated Kurdish autonomy (labeled "separatists" by the government) and Muslims which opposed the secularist state establishment, mostly around the headscarf issue ("religious fundamentalists"). Likewise, in China, student demonstrators in Tiananmen – a heterogeneous group, whose members fought against corruption and demanded political reforms, were dubbed as "counter-revolutionaries".

The reception of the term “human rights” in the Chinese and Turkish contexts has been multiple and varied. While the nationalists saw it as an instrument of Western cultural and economic hegemony, devoid of normative content, the religious and cultural conservatives considered it “inadequate” as compared to its Confucian and Islamic alternatives. In both China and Turkey, it was the victimized groups which propagated a Western notion of “human rights” –without much emphasis on individual liberties. While the individual is still not at the core of Chinese and Turkish understandings of “human rights”, the popularity of the term demonstrate that cultural or religious values are not in themselves barriers to a universal human rights regime.

In conclusion, the papers in this special issue on Asian Studies in Turkey illustrate the divergent approaches of the authors that contribute to theory and method by bringing in a third perspective, the Turkish component, into an assessment of the state of Asian Studies in the twenty-first century. They also contribute a number of case studies on Japan and China together with consideration of global issues such as human rights, cross cultural translation, and international relations. While the papers represent the initial phase of Asian Studies in Turkey, the originality of their narratives promises further methodological and theoretical jousts between Europe and Asia in a globalizing context.

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