

The Global Moment of Asian Studies in Turkey and the Case of Bogazici University

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Abstract

This paper outlines the development of Asian studies in Turkey from their early years to 2022. A particular focus is put on the development of academic programs at Bogazici University and on the international academic partnerships it entailed. The author argues that the end of the Cold War, the “rise of Asia” in public opinion, the new Asia initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the global attraction due to international employment opportunities, represent multiple factors that have accelerated interest in Asian Studies in Turkey.

Keywords

Turkey, Japan, China, Asia, Cold War, Rise of Asia, Globalization, new Asia Initiative, Turkish Academy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Turkey

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The catalyst for the rise of Asian studies in Turkey is the mood of the times. The end of the Cold War resulted in the opening up of the world through globalization; this helped immensely in the emergence of Asian Studies in Turkey and provided the impetus for analyzing China. The end of the Cold War barrier increased interaction among scholars and academics in Turkey and Asian countries. In many respects the Cold War limited the potential for direct academic interest between countries such as Turkey, China, Japan, and Korea, and indeed any country that is located far from the major centers in the West. They could learn about each other only through the ideological and scholarly lenses of the Cold War camp to which they belonged. For example, even though Japanese and Turks have always claimed to have a friendly attitude toward each other, for most of the Cold War era their academic focus was on the relationship of each country with the major centers of the West, in Europe and the United States. The Turkish side finally broke the barrier by establishing a special Program of Japanese language and literature at Ankara University, under Eastern Languages and Literatures, but it was as late as 1985. By then Japanese academia, despite its long tradition (ever since the Meiji period, 1868–1912) of scholars who did significant work on

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Central Asian Turkic studies as well as on Turkish and Ottoman history, still had not established a Turkish studies program or Department.¹ Finally, the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies created a Department of Turkish Studies, a decade later than the Turkish program on Japanese. In sum, most of the time academics could not conduct research about each other. Social scientists frequently relied on English language publications, mostly from the United States, with some exceptions of well-versed scholars in languages who could study on their own.

With China, at least for Turkish academics, the situation was even more difficult. Even though both countries could rely on scholars and academic centers for the study of each other's language and culture, they belonged to different political camps, although the National Minorities University in Beijing always had a Turkish language and culture program.

In Turkey, the Chair of Chinese language and Culture under the Department of Eastern Languages and Cultures (est. in 1935) at the Faculty of Letters of Ankara University was the sole center for studying Chinese in Turkey until the end of the Cold War. However, the introduction of Chinese studies at Ankara University, in 1935, is an important event insofar as it illustrates the global political framework that takes place in academic affairs and institution-building in a country. In the paper by Ceren Ergenç also published in this volume, she explains that "Turkey's first Sinology department was established by Professor Annemarie von Gabain at Ankara University's Language and History-Geography Faculty in 1935, then institutionalized by Professor Wolfram Eberhard who taught in Ankara from 1937 to 1948." Professor Wolfram Eberhard (1909–1989), the eminent German Sinologist known for his works on the historical sociology of ancient Chinese society, was forced to leave Germany because of Nazi policies. He was immediately offered a job by the Turkish government, which at the time hired close to a thousand German émigré academics and technicians who played an important role in the modernization project of Turkey. Eberhard was invited to establish the program in Sinology which was to be part of the Faculty of Letters at Ankara University. The program's aim was to introduce to the Turkish public the study of the East and the West. Aware of the strong role that Sinology played in deciphering the archaic Turkish language, the Tujue of the Tang dynasty, through the monumental work of European scholars such as Emmanuel Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918) who authored the *Documents sur les Tou-kiue occidentaux* (1903), and Vilhelm Thomsen (1892–1927) who deciphered the earliest example of Runic Turkish on the Orkhon monuments in Mongolia, President Atatürk and the authorities of the day considered the study of Sinology critical for understanding ancient Turkish history, which was the new national historiographical focus of the Republic. The Chinese dynastic histories provided the only extensive, written narrative sources about the ancient Turkic nomads – starting with the Tujue people, the nomad foes and later friends of the Tang dynasty. Hence, Fascism in Europe inadvertently helped in founding Asian Studies in Turkey with a focus on Classical Chinese textual sources on the ancient Turks of Inner Asia, in line with the "search for origins" of romantic nationalism. After the end of the Second World War, like many leading German scientists and scholars, Eberhard was recruited by American academia and became a professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley. He taught in Berkeley between 1948 and 1989 until his demise, and he continued to publish works in line with his seminal articles that were published in Ankara on Chinese and pastoral nomad relations along the frontier of the Chinese empire.

Today, the strengthening of relations between Turkey and Asian countries is acting as an incentive for enhancing academic programs on Asian languages and studies in Turkey. This growing interest for the study of Asian societies also helps improve mutual relations, and it creates a virtuous cycle. For instance, Japanese language programs in Turkey began in 1986 in Ankara University's Faculty of Languages and History-Geography as the Sub-Department of Japanese Language and Literature under the Department of Eastern Languages that includes Indology, Sinology, and Korean Language and Literature, and in 1988 at Bogazici University as an elective

five-year program, which also served as required language training for undergraduate and graduate studies in the History Department and the Department of Translation Studies. By 2022, undergraduate and graduate programs in Asian languages and literatures, as well as graduate programs in regional studies of Asian Studies, have shown exponential growth by reaching the high level of 12 universities that teach Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages and literature, or regional studies majoring on Japan, China, and Korea. Ankara University stands out as having the oldest Asian language and literature programs at undergraduate and graduate levels. Bogazici University founded the second oldest program in Japanese language, and the first Chinese language program in Istanbul. Bogazici University is also noted for having pioneered the Master of Arts in Asian Studies with Thesis and has developed a Japanese history major.² In the last two decades, training in Chinese language has caught up with Japanese. Here, the founding of the Confucius Institutes in Middle East Technical University in 2007, Bogazici University in 2008, Okan University in 2013, and Yeditepe University in 2017 strongly contributed to the establishment of undergraduate and graduate programs in Chinese language and Asian Studies. Erciyes University already has Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language and literature Departments. Hacı Bayram Veli University has recently founded a Japanese Language and Literature Department. Yeditepe University founded a Confucius Institute in 2017, collaborating with Nankai University. In Istanbul, Koc University, Özyeğin University, and Bilgi University in Istanbul have also added Chinese or Japanese to their curricula. Istanbul University has established a department of Chinese Language and Literature, expanding on the long tradition of teaching Chinese in that university. Furthermore, the Asian Studies Center in Bogazici University was founded in 2009 as the first Asian Studies Center in Turkey. The phenomenal growth of Asian studies in such a short time in Turkey can also be attributed to the pull of globalization which attracted the strong interest of the young generation in finding international employment at home as well as abroad with better salaries and opportunities in recent years.

The recent growing interest of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in developing Asia-oriented programs and training young diplomats in response to the importance of Asia in global affairs today is also acting as an incentive for the development of so many Asia-oriented programs of study. In March 2022, the Ministry has organized an intensive licensed education program in Asian affairs taught by academics from various universities and seasoned diplomats for students selected from many universities under the newly established “Asia Anew Initiative” division. Today, there are already 18 such Centers in 17 Turkish Universities, mostly in state universities, although private Universities such as Koc University are also increasingly active in organizing Asia-oriented academic events. The Asian Studies Center at Bogazici collaborates with the Confucius Institute in academic events including the annual China-Turkey Forum in Shanghai. On November 15–16, 2014, they organized a joint Conference on the Missionary Experience in Late Ottoman Empire and Imperial China. The participants were historians in the field of missionary history in Lebanon, Istanbul, Salonica, and China. The meeting was very fruitful, and the papers were prepared for an international publication. Cooperation between Bogazici and Shanghai Universities aided the development of Turkish Studies in China, with the growth of a new generation of Chinese specialists in Turkish and Ottoman history and contemporary Turkey. This can be seen in the Conference on Turkish Studies (“Turkey: History and Culture”) held on October 22–26, 2016, at Shanghai University. It was organized by Prof. Guo Changgang at the School of Liberal Arts and the Center for Turkish Studies, which was founded following the establishment of the collaboration agreement between Bogazici and Shanghai Universities in 2008 on the occasion of launching the Confucius Institute at Bogazici; participants represented the new generation of specialists on Turkey in Chinese academia. On October 19–20, 2018, Bogazici University hosted the 4th China-Turkey Forum on “Globalization, China and Turkey” that focused on economic developments,

being attended by participants from Shanghai University, Fudan University, and other universities in China. Bogazici University and Ankara University Centers are active in publishing collected articles or monographs on Asian Studies that reflect the research interests in Turkey. While for many academics, research on Asia still relies mostly on publications in English, there is a pronounced increase in the number of publications that use Asian languages as well as researchers who have advanced language skills, especially in Chinese, Japanese, and recently Korean. A number of journals that publish articles on Asian studies have appeared as well. The English-language journal, *Global Perspectives on Japan*, has been published by Forum Tauri Press and the Japanese Studies Association in Turkey for five years already, with the support of Toshiba International Foundation. It also seeks to invite new research from Asia scholars in the MENA region, the Balkans and the Mediterranean, as well as from leading Asian Studies centers in the West and in Asia.

Whereas Japanese language study has been much more popular in Turkey, with around one thousand university students enrolled, due to the special historical relations between the two countries, the study of Chinese has also caught up fast with around a thousand students both at the high school and university levels. Korean language study is also following closely. Furthermore, there are also many academics working as part of departments of Marmara University, Kadir Has University, Medeniyet University in Istanbul, or Hacettepe University in Ankara, who have been conducting independent work on Asian studies, with a focus on East Asia and South-East Asia, on topics ranging from history and politics to economics. However, in comparison with the strong interest in China, Japan, and Korea, South Asian studies of India is relatively lagging behind in comparison, probably due to lack of strong economic relations.

Since Asian studies in Turkey are closely intertwined with my personal history, I feel compelled to explain how I became one of the pioneers in the Turkish academy on the study of Asia. My personal immersion in Asian studies began as a result of growing up in Japan during the 1960s because my father was the ambassador in Tokyo. Hence, I am the product of a diplomatic family's life story. I learned Japanese in high school and college when I studied at the International Christian University of Japan. According to the Japan Foundation, I was the first student from Turkey to have studied in Japan in the post-war period as a private student without government scholarship. My graduate education continued in the United States, at George Washington University, then at Georgetown University in Japanese language and linguistics, and finally I earned a Ph.D. in Japanese History at Columbia University in 1981. So, I define my academic formation as being also very much a part of the U.S. academy. After I returned to Turkey, I started teaching Japanese history at the Department of History of Bogaziçi University. I also pioneered the Japanese language program in 1988, the Chinese language program in 2002, Korean in 2010, founded the Asian Studies Center in 2009 and finally established the Master of Arts program in Asian Studies in 2012. These were all important steps in the formation of Asian Studies. My generation included only a few scholars who, in addition to myself, are my colleagues in Bogazici university today: Isenbike Togan in Chinese History (Ph.D. Harvard), the late Pulat Otkan (Sinology, Ankara University), and Mete Tuncoku (Ph.D. in Japanese International Relations, Kyoto University) – all pioneering figures in Asian studies in Turkey. Today, Middle East Technical University offers M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Asian regional studies under the Regional Studies graduate program. At Bogazici University, students have already graduated from M.A. and Ph.D. programs in History with a focus on Chinese and Japanese history, particularly in the modern period. The Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fields of the Department of Oriental Languages and Cultures, Ankara University, have undergraduate and graduate programs, including the Ph.D. program in the study of language, literature, and culture. Since 2012, the M.A. program in Asian Studies at Bogazici has graduated students with a focus on Japan, China, Russia/Central Asia, and Korea.

Nowadays there is a new generation in Turkey. Students are very much interested in topics concerning Asia, the rise of China, the brilliant modernization background of Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia – all countries and peoples that are attracting attention. We have so many more students studying these languages and cultures, and they are now slowly becoming the first substantial group of academics. People are conducting graduate work in Asian economics, politics, and literature. Translations have also increased in the meantime. Hence, in my opinion, Turkey, though modest in terms of library collections and university experience in teaching Asian studies compared to the major centers in Europe and the United States, has come a long way. Presently I think we can confidently say that Turkey has become the only significant academic center for Asian Studies in the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and Central Asia. This is the only country so far in the region, with the exception of Israel, which has undergraduate and graduate programs in Chinese, Japanese, and other studies related to Asia. We certainly are the only country with a significant growth of Asian studies in comparison to other countries around the Mediterranean like Spain, Portugal, and Greece – with the exception of Italy which is very advanced in this respect – and to countries in Eastern Europe, with the exception of Hungary and Poland which have strong scholarly traditions of Asian languages, literatures, and philology.

Ever since the 1980s, I had wanted to set up an Asian studies center at Bogazici University, and feel fortunate that I had the opportunity to realize the stepping stones for this vision. I started thinking seriously about it in the year 2000 when we were about to embark on a Chinese studies program. The students were much more interested in Asia than before, and I saw it as an opportunity to cumulate my efforts in this endeavor. It should be a center to bring together the newly visible young generation of scholars who know Asian languages and are doing work on Asia, which would allow us to form a collegiate environment as a community to hold workshops, conduct joint research, establish a network for academics, and be their outlet into the global scene. Since its establishment, the Asian Studies Center has been doing exactly that. We have formed a network of scholars from Istanbul and Ankara, we meet occasionally, and we hold forums for talks with visiting professors and our young scholars in Asian Studies. We have had people from the United States, China, Japan, Korea, Australia, Sweden, and Brazil as visiting scholars at the Center. I think we are now becoming known as a burgeoning new center in Asian Studies with a global perspective in Turkey.

We conduct most of our work internationally in English, most of our talks and lectures are in English, but we also purposefully publish in Turkish in order to widen the knowledge of the Turkish reading public about Asia. For example, in 2010 we published the First Japanese Studies Conference in Turkey, Volume I, which brought together specialists in Japanese Studies from many universities. The second Conference was held in 2013, and the papers were also published. The third Conference was held on June 17–19, 2016, and the third volume of papers by Turkish academics in Japanese Studies will follow. The Asian Studies Center of Bogazici University, the Japanese Studies Association of Turkey, which has been developing intellectual and academic exchange between Japan and Turkey since 1993 as an NGO, and the Japan Foundation have collaborated in these events.

The 2013 book titled *Thinking about China in Turkey* (Türkiye’de Çin’i Düşünmek) is the first comprehensive study of Chinese culture and society in the Turkish language. The book is a collection of papers of young academics in Turkey who are working on different topics related to China. Most of these academics are capable of using Chinese sources. This is a new occurrence, and we want to provide a publishing outlet for them so that their academic works are available to the rest of the public. I should add that the book has become a best seller. Recent publications of the Center on *Japanese Studies in Turkey* (Türkiye’de Japonya Çalışmaları) a triannual publication of 4 volumes

based on selected papers of conferences sponsored by Japan Foundation have also attracted readership that represents the scholarship of Japan specialists in Turkish universities.

The Turkish academy's potential for Asian studies is important. Although we will not be able to compete with the main centers in the United States and Europe in terms of libraries and resources, we have the great advantage of geography.

We have three major focuses, Japan and China, and the Korea major has also been attracting interest lately. This is inevitable because of the background of the scholars active in our center. Most of our colleagues are specialists of either Japan or China, but recently we have also received the generous support of the Korean Foundation, which is sponsoring a Korean professor of History and Politics to teach in the program. I look forward to having more people working on Korea and India, as for the moment there are very few. Hopefully, interest in these areas will grow in the future.

We have also held a very successful conference called "Turkey and China at the Crossroads of the 21st Century" in October 2012 through our partnership with Shanghai University. It was a very fruitful beginning of academic interaction between both countries, and it was followed up with the 2015 Meeting of Chinese and Turkish Writers and the above mentioned Conference on Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire and Imperial China. In April 2017, the Asian Studies Center and the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul jointly sponsored the international workshop on "Rethinking Global Histories for the Present: The Overland and Maritime Silk Roads in Central Eurasia and the Indian Ocean" that had participants from Turkey, China, Japan, India, Sweden, and the United States. In addition to the activities of the Center, the Master of Arts in Asian Studies program, the first M.A. in Asian Studies with Thesis in Turkey which began in Bogazici University in 2014, has already graduated more than thirty students with theses on Japan, China, Russia, and Korea.

During 2013, representing the initiative of Asian Studies in Turkey, Selcuk Esenbel and Altay Atlı published the paper "Turkey's Changing Foreign Policy Stance: Getting Closer to Asia?" for the Middle East-Asia Project of the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC. As the Asian Studies Center at Bogazici, we are also holding joint research projects with our colleagues in China, Japan, Italy, Israel, and the United States over topics such as the interaction of Asian countries, particularly China and Japan, in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and African region. The Center is best located for the study of this topic both from historical and contemporary angles. One of our colleagues is actively collaborating with Italian counterparts at the Torino World Affairs Institute on China and the Middle East. In recent years, public and NGO think tanks in Turkey are also increasingly focusing on organizing academic meetings on Asia and China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Research Center, Turkish Eurasian Studies Association, ORSAM (Center for Middle East Strategic Studies), and recently the Istanbul Policy Center at Sabanci University have been organizing numerous meetings with counterparts in China and Japan, and they include members of the Asian Studies Center among the participants.

Recent statistics of Turkey's global trade and investment show that Turkey's economic relations with China and Japan are growing much more rapidly than in the past and are becoming more sophisticated, involving various technology oriented joint ventures (digital technology/software programming for telecommunications with China, nuclear energy technology with Japan). Both Japan and China are investing more in the Turkish economy and are more engaged in the transfer of technology. In 2016, the Japanese and Turkish government agreed to establish the Turkish-Japanese Technical University in Istanbul as part of the training for the scientists who will go on to work in the power plant that will offer programs in high Japanese technology. Traditionally, Turkey's financial, commercial, and technological relations are with the European Union. Even today, when the European Union is suffering from the economic crisis, and Turkey's exports and

economic relations with Africa, the Middle East, and Asia are on the rise, still forty-four percent of Turkey's exports and commercial relations are with the members of the European Union. That has to be taken seriously. I think what is happening is that there is a very dynamic divergence in the sense that the Turkish economic community is compensating for the problems in Europe by focusing on developing relations with Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It is not replacing Europe with Asia; it is compensating for the difficulties in Europe by increasing its share of trade with other regions. Similarly, Turkish and Chinese academics are complementing their academic interests with a new look at shared topics that is leading for the first time to new knowledge and perceptions about themselves and the world that have not been brought to light until today. Although the Turkish academic experience on Asian Studies is still in its initial stages, a young generation of scholars who have combined language skills with unique agendas of their geographic location carry the potential of enriching the field of study on a global level, with a focus on topics that they can make valuable contributions to.

Notes

1. Esenbel (2018) includes articles by Klaus Röhrborn, Katayama Akio, and Mehmet Ölmez which discuss the strong Japanese interest in Turkology, Central Asia, and Inner Asia in connection with academic and geo-political reasons.
2. Sezen (2022) provides a comprehensive account of Asian Studies programs and centers in Turkey. It also notes the pioneering role of Bogazici University in founding the first Asian Studies Center and the M.A. programme in Asian Studies (MAAS).

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