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Yang, Chen; Xie, Fang

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yang, C., & Xie, F. (2022). The Mutual Construction of Image of China and Turkey: Perceptions, Problems, and Policy Proposals. *BRIQ Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 3(1), 16-25. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89615-5>

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# The Mutual Construction of Image of China and Turkey: Perceptions, Problems, and Policy Proposals\*



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**YANG CHEN\***

Asst. Prof.  
Department of History,  
Shanghai University, China

**XIE FANG\*\***

Master Candidate  
Department of World History, College of Liberal Arts  
Shanghai University, China

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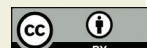
*\*Dr. Yang Chen is Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Shanghai University's College of Liberal Arts and Executive Director of the Centre for Turkish Studies at Shanghai University. He has published two books about Turkey and several papers in journals such as Critical Sociology, Sociology of Islam, Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly, Arab World Research, and more. His main areas of research are Islamic movements in Turkey, party politics in Turkey, Turkey's foreign policy, and China-Turkey relations.*

*E-mail: [ycwf2008@163.com](mailto:ycwf2008@163.com)*

*<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4840-642>*

*\*\*Xie Fang is a master's candidate majoring in World History in the College of Liberal Arts and a research assistant of the Center for Turkish Studies at Shanghai University. Her research fields include the early history of Republic of Turkey and Turkey-Greece Relations.*

How to cite: Yang, C & Xie, F. (2021/2022). The mutual construction of image of China and Turkey: Perceptions, problems, and policy proposals. *Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*, 3(1), 16-25.



## ABSTRACT

Since establishing the strategic cooperative relationship between China and Turkey in 2010, bilateral relations have entered a new era with more political mutual trust, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges compared with the previous 40 years. However, in contrast to frequent official contacts, ordinary people's views on each country have not kept pace with this new development. In the eyes of the Turks, the image of China is still linked to some negative events. Due to several historical reasons, China's understanding of Turkey remains at a superficial level. If Chinese and Turkish people become closer emotionally and understand each other more, then the two countries' images will significantly improve, and China-Turkish relations will inevitably strengthen.

**Keywords:** China Studies, China-Turkey Relations, Image of China; Image of Turkey, Turkish Studies

2020 AND ITS AFTERMATH HAVE BEEN AN important period for Chinese and Turkish history and the development of their bilateral relations. 2020 marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the China-Turkey strategic partnership. Furthermore, 2021 marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Turkey and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China. In 2023, Turkey will have seen a century since its founding. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented negative consequences, China and Turkey are constantly struggling to realize their "Chinese Dream" and "Turkish Dream", respectively. They both strive to choose an independent road.

Moreover, Turkey and China also share similar views on their respective development strategies, exemplified in their mutual synergy for improving the cooperation between the "Belt & Road" Initiative and the "Middle Corridor" Project. China attaches great importance to Turkey's increasing role in regional and global affairs, while Turkey is also very supportive of China's rise (Colakoglu, 2014). This completely contrasts the suspicion, criticism, and even containment of the development of China and Turkey by Western countries.

Since the strategic cooperative relationship between China and Turkey was established in 2010, bilateral relations have entered a new era with more

political mutual trust, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges compared with the previous 40 years (Chen, 2020). However, in contrast to frequent official contacts, ordinary people's views on each country have not kept pace with this new development. In the Turks' eyes, China's image is still connected with negative events, and Japan and South Korea's positive image in Turkey are still way ahead of that of China. Due to historical reasons, China's understanding of Turkey is not sufficient either. The construction of the "Belt and Road" Initiative mainly addresses connectivity in policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people exchange. Arguably, the "people-to-people exchange" is the most important basis for developing relations between the two countries. As an old Chinese saying goes, "Friendship, which derives from close contact between the people, holds the key to sound state-to-state relations". If Chinese and Turkish people become closer emotionally and understand each other more, then the two countries' images of each other will significantly improve, and China-Turkish relations will inevitably strengthen.

This article is structured as follows. The first part analyses current developments in the Sino-Turkish strategic cooperative relationship since 2010 based on a macro-level. The second part describes the image of China in the eyes of the Turkish people



China-Turkey relations are normalizing thanks to the leadership of the two heads of state. (United World, 2019)

and the image of Turkey in the eyes of the Chinese people. The third part explores the possible reasons behind these diverging perceptions. The article will conclude with a section that proposes suggestions on how to improve the image of each other.

### **The Status Quo Development of China-Turkey Relations**

Since 2010, the development of China-Turkey relations can be roughly divided into three stages. The first stage is from establishing the strategic partnership in 2010 to the attempted military coup in 2016. The main feature of China-Turkish relations at this stage was “two steps forward and one step backwards”. Although China and Turkey held the “Chinese Culture Year” (2012) and the “Turkish Culture Year” (2013) in each other’s countries at this stage, relations deteriorated in 2014 and 2015 following violent terrorist incidents in Xinjiang. During this period, the Turkish side was hesitant towards further development of China-Turkey

relations, and the main driving force of the bilateral relations was the Chinese side.

The second stage is from the attempted military coup in 2016 to February 2019. The main feature of this stage was that “misfortune tests the sincerity of friends”. On August 3-6, 2016, the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming visited Turkey (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). On April 18-20, 2017, the Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong visited Turkey (Yang & Chun, 2017). Both visits were conducted when Turkey was under difficult circumstances and were regarded by Turkey as supporting its national sovereignty and unity. Subsequently, President Erdogan attended the Hangzhou G20 Summit on September 3rd 2016. In May 2017, President Erdogan participated in the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation hosted in Beijing and delivered a keynote speech. This series of interactions reflects both the importance that China attaches to Turkey and Turkey’s trust in China.

The third stage is from February 2019 onwards. The main feature of this stage is “go forward with caution”. On February 9th 2019, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated that the Chinese government had established a “concentration camp” in Xinjiang to imprison one million Uyghurs. They accused the Chinese government of seriously infringing on the human rights of the Uyghurs and other Muslims by trying to “eliminate” their race, religion, and culture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). This makes Turkey the first country in the Islamic world to criticize China on Xinjiang-related issues, which has aroused great attention from international media.

**Evidently, the lack of political mutual trust is still the crux of developing Sino-Turkish relations. However, thanks to the leadership of the two heads of state, China-Turkey relations can always calm and set sail again.**

China and Turkey’s relations are like a seesaw when following this series of events. The outbreak of the July 5th Incident in 2009 caused the deterioration of Sino-Turkish relations. On that day, a serious wave of violent crime of beating, smashing, looting, and burning occurred in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Many innocent people and police officers were killed or injured, many vehicles were burnt down, and many shops were smashed and burned. However, the reaction from Turkey was not to blame the violent terrorists but criticize China’s Xinjiang policy. Fortunately, in the next year, the two countries managed to reduce the influence of this event and

establish a strategic cooperative relationship. In July 2015, however, an anti-China demonstration broke out in Turkey. Following President Erdogan’s visit to China at the end of July, relations between the two countries returned to normal.

After the unsuccessful military coup in Turkey broke out in 2016, China-Turkey relations have further developed, and a consensus has been reached on issues such as anti-terrorism. In February 2019, the Turkish Foreign Ministry’s accusation of China’s Xinjiang policy again led to a crisis in Sino-Turkish relations. However, with President Erdogan’s visit to China in July, bilateral relations returned to normal again.

Evidently, the lack of political mutual trust is still the crux of developing Sino-Turkish relations, meaning that, whenever such issues break out, the political relations between the two countries become turbulent. However, thanks to the leadership of the two heads of state, China-Turkey relations can always calm and set sail again.

### **The Chinese Perception of Turkey and the Turkish Perception of China**

In the past ten years, with the continuous increase of personnel exchanges between China and Turkey, Turkey’s image in China has continuously improved, and some Turkish keywords have become frequently mentioned in China as well. One is “hüzün” (Pamuk, 2007). This word comes from Istanbul: Memories and the City, the work of Orhan Pamuk, winner of the Turkish Nobel Prize in Literature. As a well-known writer, almost all Pamuk’s novels have been translated into Chinese, and the Turkish image constructed in his novels is well-known to Chinese readers. Of course, the current Turkish Republic is not a gloomy existence, but very modern, bright, and beautiful, in sharp contrast with the gloomy existence of the late Ottoman Empire.



Meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi within the framework of the 50th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. (Xinhua/Mustafa Kaya, 2021)

The second is “romance”. In the Chinese imagination, Turkey is a romantic place with excellent geography and scenery. Just mentioning names, like the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Bosphorus Strait, will arouse clear visions and longing in the Chinese. That’s why the song “Take You to Romantic Turkey” is so popular in China.

The third is “diversity”. Turkey is a country with diverse cultures. The remains of many empires are constantly being excavated in Turkey. Mosques, churches, synagogues, and more can be seen everywhere in Istanbul. Besides, Turkish cuisine incorporates the essence of diets from neighbouring countries and has won the reputation of the world’s third-largest nation of delicacies.

In addition to these positive impressions, the image of Turkey in the minds of the Chinese people has also been affected by the following historical events, which

have also deeply influenced the Turkish impression of China. The first event is the Korean War. In China’s historical narrative, the Korean War was for the real founding of New China. In 1949, the People’s Republic of China had just been established, and the United States isolated and blocked New China in all aspects. Militarily, the US launched the Korean War, sent the Seventh Fleet to invade the Taiwan Strait and intervened in the Indochina War in Southeast Asia. Politically, the United States asked the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other countries not to recognize the legitimacy of New China and manipulated the United Nations to prevent New China from sending legal representatives to replace seats illegally occupied by the Kuomintang. Economically, blockades and embargoes were imposed on China and merchant ships of all countries were prevented from entering New China’s ports. To break the siege and blockade of Western

countries headed by the United States, China sent a “volunteer army” to participate in the Korean War. At this time, the Turkish Democratic Party government sent a “Turkish brigade” to join the “United Nations Army” led by the United States. China and Turkey became enemies at the time.

**Western agitation and propaganda greatly contribute to amplifying problems, which inhibits the steady development of bilateral relations. If the two populations can share similar perceptions on this issue, the steady development of relations between the two countries will acquire a more solid public foundation.**

This incident also had a profound impact on Turkey’s understanding of modern China. Before the Korean War, Turks knew little and had no views about China. In the Korean War, though, Turkey had war correspondents for the first time. They went to the Korean battlefield to report on the fighting between China and Turkey at that time. Most reports on China emphasized that China was a communist country and that Turkey, as a member of the anti-communist camp, must resolutely oppose “Red China”. However, the difference in ideology alone cannot inflame the emotions of the domestic people. Therefore, many reports trace the contradictions and conflicts between China and Turkey in history, arousing Turkish national sentiment and deepening hostility towards China (Ungor, 2006).

The second is the Varyag incident. The Varyag aircraft carrier is the predecessor of China’s first aircraft carrier Liaoning. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Varyag aircraft carrier had not yet been completed and could only be left idle in Ukraine. La-

ter, a Macau businessperson bought it in 1998, hoping to transform it into a comprehensive maritime tourism facility. However, in July 2000, when the Varyag left the Black Sea port and headed for the Bosphorus Strait, Turkey was pressured by a third country and refused to let the Varyag fly due to it being oversized. It was only allowed to be released on October 31st 2001 (Xian, 2011). More than one year’s non-release and negotiations made the Chinese feel a great humiliation, especially alongside continuous pressure from the West starting in the 1990s. Several years ago, when Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, the naval colonel in charge of this matter at the time, visited Shanghai, he explained that the Varyag was not allowed to pass through the strait for several reasons, including that the aircraft carrier was too large to pass through the sea bridge and that this created great risk for accidents. However, Chinese public opinion was not familiar with this reasoning. Chinese people have always mentioned the Varyag aircraft carrier stories as bitter memories that continue to exert negative impressions of Turkey.

The third is the so-called “Xinjiang issue”. In fact, it is known that some Western countries are the main force providing shelter and assistance to the so-called “East Turkistan” separatists, but when the Chinese people mention this issue, they always think of Turkey. In Turkey, Xinjiang is frequently referred to as “East Turkestan” in the media and public opinion. Even some politicians and political parties intensify this problem to seek their own narrow political interests (Rui & Lei, 2016). Furthermore, Western agitation and propaganda greatly contribute to amplifying these problems, which inhibits the steady development of bilateral relations. From this point of view, if the two populations can share similar perceptions on this issue, the steady development of relations between the two countries will acquire a more solid public foundation (Ye, 2015).

In addition to the above incidents, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought new challenges and opportunities to China-Turkey relations.



Traditional Chinese dragon dance is held in Istanbul in the Year of Chinese Culture. (China Daily, 2012)

In the global fight against the pandemic, China has paid a huge price and is willing to help and cooperate with all countries in need. For example, in Turkey, President Erdogan personally took a vaccine made in China, which greatly boosted Turkey's image in the minds of the Chinese (Wei, 2021). China has also cooperated with Turkey to produce vaccines. However, some Turkish scholars with Orientalist thinking argued that this is China's "vaccine diplomacy" in adherence to Western hegemonic discourse instrumentalized by politicians. Such a recurring cycle of events brings severe challenges in promoting bilateral relations.

### **The Root Causes of Mutual Misunderstanding between the Chinese and Turkish People**

China-Turkey relations suffer from persistent misunderstandings between the people of China and

Turkey. This also applies to both countries' scholars, which inevitably affects the mutual construction of positive images. If there is no public support and mutual understanding, then the promotion of bilateral relationships will face numerous obstacles. One could enumerate the reasons behind such misunderstandings as follows:

First, there is still a gap between China and Turkey in their respective diplomatic priorities from a political perspective. In China's strategic thinking, strategic partnership with Turkey is extremely important because Turkey is both a NATO member country and a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This makes Turkey an important cooperative partner in Eurasia. In addition, Turkey has become a rising regional power, a land bridge connecting Europe and Asia, and an indispensable part of China's implementation of the "Belt and Road" initiative. For Turkey, developing



relations with China is of great significance, mainly for two reasons. Strategically, Turkey hopes to send a message to traditional Western allies that China is a strategic alternative. This can be seen from the growing military relations between the two countries, which is evident in Turkey's application to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Economically, Turkey believes that the Chinese market has invaluable economic opportunities, which is why it emphasizes its role as a bridge between the East and the West, thereby reducing its dependence on the Western economy (Chaziza, 2016). This shows that treating the West as a third party has become an important factor in China-Turkey relations. In addition, China and Turkey suffer from inconsistencies in their understandings of important global issues such as UN reform, the Syrian crisis, the Arab Spring, and more.

**In 1990, bilateral trade volume was US\$283 million, whereas in 2000 it rose to \$1.441 billion. In 2012, it was \$24.128 billion and rose to \$27.3 billion in 2015. In 2020, it was estimated at \$24.08 billion.**

Second, from a business perspective, Turkish businesspeople attach great importance to China's market. Turkey hopes to cooperate with China on railways, bridges, and hydropower projects, but the growing trade deficit has become an important concern for Turkey. China values its economic exchanges with Turkey. For example, Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd set up a research and development centre in Turkey. Huawei's 5G technology breakthrough relies greatly on Turkish scientist Prof. Erdal Arıkan's scientific achievements. Moreover, these products can directly enter the EU market thanks to the customs union between Turkey and Europe. This has laid favourable conditions for

China to expand investments in Turkey.

Over the 21st century, trade volume between Turkey and China has gradually increased and continues to do so. In 1990, it was US\$283 million, whereas in 2000 it rose to \$1.441 billion. In 2012, it was \$24.128 billion and rose to \$27.3 billion in 2015. In 2020, it was estimated at \$24.08 billion (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2021). However, the real issue is that although China is Turkey's second-largest trading partner in the world and the largest in Asia, the total trade volume between the two countries has not yet made a breakthrough since 2010, meaning there is still a large gap in the mutually declared goal of US\$50 billion.

Another problem is that Turkey does not hold an advantage in Sino-Turkish trade exchanges. The products exported to China are mainly raw materials, and the imported products are mainly machinery. How to reduce the trade deficit, upgrade the exchange of products between the two countries, and expand mutual investment between the two countries are all issues that China and Turkey need to address and resolve together.

Third, from an academic perspective, China and Turkey have held the "Turkish Cultural Year in China", "Chinese Cultural Year in Turkey", and "2018 Turkey Tourism Year in China". The exchanges between the cultural and intellectual circles of the two countries have begun to increase, and an increasing number of scholars and students work and study in each other's respective countries. However, the overall understanding between the two cannot satisfy the needs of both sides. In Turkey, Sinology or Chinese Studies has achieved remarkable results since its establishment at Ankara University in 1935, but it is currently facing difficulties such as insufficient faculty, difficulties in recruiting students, and inadequate social and government support (Saritas & Yang, 2014). In China, although many universities have established Turkish Studies Centres dedicated to Turkey Studies, their supply of accurate and

authentic knowledge is still inadequate. This is the fundamental reason China and Turkey still lack a correct understanding of each other and mostly rely on third-party materials to realize this aim. This situation urgently needs to be resolved.

### **Preliminary Measures to Reduce the Misunderstanding of Each Other**

As mentioned above, resolving the misunderstandings between the people of China and Turkey requires the participation of multiple actors and the joint effort of politicians, businesses, scholars, journalists, and the great masses. The most significant factor is to strengthen the exchanges between the two peoples, cultivate a group of experts and scholars familiar with each other's national conditions, and quickly improve their correct understanding of each other through the supply of more knowledge about China and Turkey. This aim can be achieved by the following:

First, promote the development of Turkey Studies in China and China Studies in Turkey and increase the supply of professional, unbiased, accurate knowledge in each other's countries. Although Turkey Studies as a research area started relatively late in China, it has achieved rapid development in the past ten years. For example, in China, several centres specializing in Turkey Studies have been established across the country. An academic journal named "Turkish Studies" was issued, the Turkish Studies Consortium was established, and the academic conference on Turkish Studies is held multiple times each year. Of course, in general, these works still fail to meet the needs of Chinese academic circles and ordinary people. For example, book publications on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk have been abundant in Turkey and the rest of the world, but there has not been a monograph published in China, and there is still no Chinese version of Atatürk's Nutuk. Therefore, there is still a long way to go for Chinese Turkey scholars.

Similarly, China Studies seems to face a similar situation in Turkey. The number of scholars studying contemporary China is still relatively limited, meaning the supply of knowledge about China is inadequate and cannot satisfy the needs of the Turkish people. A significant development in this area is the creation of a research centre called The Istinye University Centre for Belt and Road Studies (or Kuşak ve Yol Çalışmaları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi, KUYÇAM) in 2020. This is Turkey's first research centre that focuses on the "Belt and Road", emphasizing China Studies. The new era of China-Turkey relations calls for the emergence of a new generation of researchers.

Second, vigorously develop China-Turkey tourism cooperation and increase direct exchanges between ordinary people. Tourism brings economic benefits, is a cultural industry, and represents the most advantageous means for people to connect. Turkey's tourism industry is highly developed, attracting 40 to 50 million tourists every year, but the number of tourists from China only increased from 100,000 to the current 500,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic, thus only accounting for a small percentage of total travellers to Turkey. However, even this small number of tourists has already played a very important role in promoting the romantic image of Turkey in China. The same is true for China. Turkish students visiting China through summer camps or other exchange programs also help to challenge stereotypes. Tourism encourages a more accurate and authentic lens for ordinary people to view the other country, first-hand experience that is often more effective than news, media, and art.

Third, actively establish joint research centres and even joint universities to consolidate mutual trust between the two countries through cooperation in scientific research. Turkey already has similar scientific research cooperation projects with many other countries that have achieved concrete results. In recent years, the number of Chinese students

studying in Turkey and the number of Turkish students studying in China have increased, thus showing great potential for the future. However, if a joint research centre or a joint university can be established, then higher-level scholars can go on mutual visits and conduct dialogue, exchanges, and share in fields of cutting-edge technology and social sciences. Such exchanges are key to breaking the dominant role that Western countries have in producing knowledge, eradicating the research paradigm of “Orientalism”, and working together to realize the independent paths of the two countries.

### Conclusion

In the past two hundred years, China-Turkey relations have been built on “common destiny” and “political equality”. A hundred years ago, the Ottoman Empire was regarded as the “Sick Man of Europe” while China was called the “Sick Man of East Asia”. When the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of China met again in 1925, both countries faced a historical turning point in their resistance to Western imperialism, and national independence. Now, in the 21st century, China’s “Chinese Dream” and Turkey’s “Turkish Dream” are waiting to be realized. Bilateral relations between China and Turkey have a firm foundation for mutual sympathy, support, and cooperation, but they must go further in developing mutual understanding between ordinary people. Through continuous contact, understanding, and cognition, the two populations can understand each other, eliminate past misunderstandings, and lay a solid foundation for promoting bilateral relations that are further rooted and reach even higher than before.

### Acknowledgements:

This article is supported by funding from the “Key Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Ministry of Education of China” (17JZD036) and “Post-funded Project of Chinese National Social Science Foundation”. 🌸

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